

Chapter 3: The Universal Cry for Justice

"Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause."

— Isaiah 1:17

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

— Micah 6:8

"Justice is the constant and perpetual will to give each person his due."

— St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 58, a. 1

The Universal Cry That Reveals Our Nature

"That's not fair!"

These three words, spoken countless times by children on playgrounds and adults in boardrooms, reveal something profound about human nature. Whether it's a child protesting an unequal distribution of candy or an adult witnessing corruption in government, this instinctive cry emerges from the deepest part of our being. It's not learned behavior—it's written on our hearts.

This universal cry for justice reveals that we are created for moral order, not chaos. Every human being, regardless of culture, education, or background, possesses an innate sense that things *ought* to be fair, that people *ought* to be treated with dignity, and that wrongs *ought* to be made right. Scripture suggests this isn't mere social conditioning—it's evidence of our creation in the image of God, who is perfectly just. As St. Paul explains, even those without the written law "show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness" (Romans 2:15).

What Children Know About Justice

Children demonstrate pure moral clarity about fairness before adults complicate justice with sophisticated theories:

"Everyone should be treated the same!" Children instinctively expect equal treatment and know that favoritism based on arbitrary preferences violates human dignity.

"Bullies should be stopped!" Children understand that using power to harm the weak is evil and expect authority figures to protect the vulnerable.

"Promises should be kept!" Children know that breaking your word damages trust and violates justice—reliability and truthfulness are essential.

"Truth should win!" Children expect honesty to be rewarded and lies exposed. They have an innate sense that reality matters and deception corrupts the moral order.

This reflects what St. Paul describes as "the law written on their hearts" (Romans 2:15). Jesus' command to "become like children" (Matthew 18:3) includes recovering this moral clarity that recognizes injustice immediately.

The Nature of True Justice

Justice is not merely human opinion or social convention—it flows from God's own nature and is written on every human heart through natural law. The Catechism teaches us that "the natural law expresses the original moral sense which enables man to discern by reason the good and the evil" (CCC 1954).

Divine Foundation of Justice

God is perfectly just. Justice flows from God's nature as the source of all moral order. As the Psalmist declares, "The Lord is righteous in all his ways and kind in all his works" (Psalm 145:17). God's justice is not arbitrary but reflects His perfect knowledge of truth and His infinite love for creation.

Natural law written on hearts. God has inscribed basic principles of justice on every human heart, which is why even those who don't know Scripture instinctively recognize certain actions as right or wrong. This universal moral sense proves that justice transcends cultural preferences.

Objective moral order. Right and wrong exist independently of human opinion. Justice is not determined by majority vote or cultural consensus but by the truth about human nature and our relationship to God.

Justice Grounded in the Image of God

The foundation of all authentic justice is the recognition that every human being is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This truth transforms justice from mere social utility into sacred duty.

Because every person bears God's image, justice demands we recognize certain fundamental rights:

Right to Life: From conception to natural death, because every human life bears God's image.

Right to Family: Children deserve both mother and father, reflecting the complementarity of God's image in male and female.

Right to Truth: Humans are rational beings made in God's image and deserve to know the truth about reality, morality, and their ultimate destiny.

Right to Freedom: Authentic freedom to choose the good, not license to sin. True freedom serves justice by enabling us to fulfill our nature as God's image-bearers.

Right to Property: Stewardship of creation as God's representatives, including the fruits of our labor and the resources needed for human flourishing.

Right to Worship: Recognition of our relationship with our Creator and the freedom to live according to our conscience.

When we ground justice in the image of God, we prevent dehumanization, stop utilitarian abuse, defend the vulnerable, and establish objective standards that reflect God's unchanging character.

Justice as Giving Each Their Due

True justice is fundamentally about **giving each being what they are owed** according to their nature, dignity, and relationship to us. This positive understanding goes far beyond merely avoiding harm—it actively seeks to honor the dignity and rights of every person.

Justice Toward God:

- **Worship and adoration** – God deserves our complete reverence as Creator and Lord

- **Obedience** - Following God's commandments as acknowledgment of His authority
- **Gratitude** - Recognizing all good things come from Him and giving thanks
- **Trust** - Believing in His goodness and providence even in difficulties

Justice Toward Our Neighbor:

- **Respect for dignity** - Treating every person as created in God's image
- **Honesty** - Speaking truth and keeping promises in all our dealings
- **Fairness** - Giving equal treatment regardless of personal preference
- **Protection** - Defending the innocent and vulnerable from harm

Justice Toward Ourselves:

- **Self-respect** - Honoring our own dignity as children of God
- **Self-discipline** - Ordering our desires according to reason and faith
- **Self-development** - Cultivating our talents for God's glory

The Hierarchy of Justice: Biblical Foundation

Scripture reveals that different beings deserve different types and degrees of reverence, creating what we might call a proper ordering of our duties. This hierarchy isn't arbitrary but reflects the order established by God Himself:

God First: The Great Commandment

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment." (Matthew 22:37-38)

Jesus establishes that our first duty of justice is to God—giving Him the supreme worship, adoration, and obedience He deserves as Creator and Lord.

Parents and Authority: The Fourth Commandment

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." (Exodus 20:12)

Scripture consistently places honor for parents and legitimate authority immediately after duties to God, showing their special place in the hierarchy of justice.

Neighbor as Yourself: The Second Great Commandment

"And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39)

Jesus reveals that justice toward our neighbor must be measured by proper justice (and mercy) toward ourselves—neither neglecting our legitimate needs nor serving ourselves at others' expense.

Civil and Religious Authority

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." (Mark 12:17)

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." (Hebrews 13:17)

This shows that both civil and religious authority have a special place in the hierarchy of justice, with civil authority having the duty to protect the common good and religious authority having the duty to protect the faith.

Creation Under Our Stewardship

"And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:28)

Scripture shows that humans have a special responsibility for creation—not as owners but as stewards accountable to God.

This biblical ordering prevents the disorder that occurs when we give ultimate devotion to finite goods or treat unequal things as if they were equal. As Jesus warned, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24).

Jesus: The Perfect Integration of Justice and Mercy

Having established the divine foundation and proper ordering of justice, we can now see how Jesus perfectly demonstrates how justice and mercy work together in authentic love. Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus embodying this perfect balance, never compromising either virtue.

The Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)

When the scribes and Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, they sought to trap Him between justice and mercy. The Law demanded stoning (justice), but they expected Jesus to show mercy that would contradict the Law. Instead, Jesus demonstrated perfect integration:

He acknowledged the demands of justice: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Jesus didn't dismiss the Law or claim adultery wasn't sinful.

He offered transformative mercy: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more" (John 8:11). His mercy wasn't permissiveness—it demanded repentance and transformation.

He revealed deeper justice: By exposing the accusers' own sinfulness, Jesus showed that true justice must begin with examining our own hearts.

Zacchaeus: Justice Inspiring Generous Restitution (Luke 19:1-10)

When Jesus showed mercy to Zacchaeus the tax collector, notice what happened: Zacchaeus immediately responded with justice that went beyond legal requirements:

"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." (Luke 19:8)

Jesus' mercy didn't excuse Zacchaeus's past injustices—it inspired him to make restitution that exceeded what the Law required (Exodus 22:1 required only double restitution for theft). True mercy awakens the desire for justice, not the excuse to avoid it.

The Cleansing of the Temple (Matthew 21:12-13)

Jesus' cleansing of the temple shows that authentic love sometimes requires forceful justice:

"And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, 'It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you make it a den of robbers.'"

This wasn't anger contradicting love—it was love expressing itself through justice. Jesus' righteous anger protected the vulnerable (the poor being exploited) and defended the sacred (God's house being profaned). Sometimes love requires confronting injustice directly. But Jesus also showed mercy and restraint. He could have used his divine power to banish them, caused some physical harm, or even killed them. But He chose to show mercy and restraint.

The Rich Young Man (Mark 10:17-22)

When the rich young man asked about eternal life, Jesus first pointed him to justice—keeping the commandments. But then He revealed that perfect love requires going beyond minimal justice:

"You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Mark 10:21)

Jesus showed that while justice establishes the foundation (keeping commandments), love calls us to generous sacrifice that serves others' needs. The young man's sadness reveals how difficult it is to move from mere justice to perfect love.

These Gospel examples show us that authentic justice and mercy don't compete—they complete each other in the perfect love that Jesus embodies.

How Justice Serves Love

Justice is not opposed to love but is love's foundation. Without justice, love becomes mere sentiment; without love, justice becomes cold legalism. Perfect love requires both.

"Justice without mercy is cruelty; mercy without justice is the mother of dissolution."
— St. Thomas Aquinas

"Love will always prove necessary, even in the most just society."
— Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*

Creates Order: Justice establishes the conditions in which love can flourish. When people know their rights will be respected and their dignity honored, they can trust enough to love.

Protects the Vulnerable: Justice defends those who cannot defend themselves, creating space for the weak to experience love without fear.

Enables Trust: Justice creates the reliability necessary for deep relationships. We can only love those we trust to treat us justly.

Demands Truth: Justice requires honesty about what is real and what is good. Love built on lies is not authentic love.

Prepares for Mercy: Justice establishes the moral order that makes mercy meaningful. Mercy is only beautiful when it transcends justice, not when it ignores it.

The Cry for Justice in Our Time

The universal cry for justice is particularly urgent in our contemporary world, where fundamental human

rights face serious challenges:

"Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics."

— Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*

Threats to Human Dignity: When societies fail to recognize that every person is created in God's image, they risk treating some lives as less valuable than others. This affects the most vulnerable—the unborn, elderly, disabled, and poor.

Breakdown of Family Structure: Children thrive when raised in stable families with both mother and father. When this foundation is weakened, children suffer and society loses its most important institution for forming virtue.

Economic Injustice: The exploitation of workers and the extreme concentration of wealth can violate human dignity. Scripture consistently calls for fair wages and care for the poor.

Religious Freedom: The freedom to worship God according to conscience is fundamental to human dignity. When this freedom is restricted, people cannot fulfill their most basic duty of justice toward their Creator.

Cultural Confusion: When societies lose sight of objective moral truth, it becomes difficult to distinguish between authentic justice and its counterfeits.

Each of these challenges calls us to apply the principles of justice grounded in human dignity and ordered toward the common good.

What Evil This Overcomes

The virtue of justice directly combats the evil of **dehumanization and exploitation**—the tendency to treat human beings as less than the image-bearers of God they truly are.

Personal Evil: Justice conquers the selfishness that ignores others' rights, the pride that demands special treatment, and the greed that exploits the vulnerable for personal gain.

Relational Evil: Justice heals broken trust, stops the cycle of revenge, and prevents the abuse of power that destroys families and friendships.

Societal Evil: Justice confronts systemic oppression, economic exploitation, and the cultural lies that deny human dignity based on race, class, or convenience.

Spiritual Evil: Justice defeats the fundamental lie that some human lives matter less than others, restoring the truth that every person bears God's image and deserves respect.

Without justice, love becomes mere sentiment that enables evil to flourish. With justice, love gains the backbone necessary to defend the vulnerable and create the order in which authentic relationships can thrive.

Justice and the Integration of Body, Mind, and Soul

True justice requires the engagement of our entire being—body, mind, and soul working in harmony:

Body: Justice demands physical action—defending the vulnerable, working honestly, caring for our own

health as stewards of God's gift, and using our strength to protect rather than exploit.

Mind: Justice requires clear thinking—studying moral principles, understanding natural law, discerning between authentic rights and false claims, and reasoning through complex ethical situations.

Soul: Justice flows from our spiritual relationship with God—recognizing His image in others, submitting to His moral order, and allowing His grace to transform our selfish hearts into instruments of His righteousness.

When body, mind, and soul are integrated in the pursuit of justice, we become effective agents of God's love in the world. When they are divided—when our actions contradict our beliefs, or our emotions override our reason—our pursuit of justice becomes compromised and ineffective.

Heavenly Father, You are perfectly just and perfectly loving. Help us to see every person as created in Your image and deserving of dignity and respect. Give us courage to defend the vulnerable, wisdom to discern true justice from its counterfeits, and hearts that cry out against injustice wherever we find it. May we be instruments of Your justice in our families, communities, and world, always remembering that true justice serves love and prepares the way for mercy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Living the Response

The cry for justice is not merely something we observe—it's a call to action. As followers of Christ, we are called to be agents of justice in our families, communities, and world. Scripture provides clear guidance for how to live this calling.

In Our Hearts: Jesus taught that authentic justice begins within: "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). We must examine our consciences regularly: Do we give God the worship He deserves? Do we treat others with the dignity they possess as image-bearers? Do we respect our own dignity through proper self-care and moral living?

In Our Families: Scripture calls us to practice justice first in our homes. This means keeping promises, treating family members fairly, and teaching children to recognize and respond to injustice. As Deuteronomy 6:6-7 commands: "These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children."

In Our Communities: The prophets consistently called God's people to defend the vulnerable and speak truth in love. Isaiah 1:17 commands: "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." This means working for policies that protect human dignity from conception to natural death.

In Our World: Jesus calls us to be "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13-14). This includes supporting organizations that fight human trafficking, defend religious freedom, protect the unborn, and promote authentic human development. Our justice must extend beyond our immediate circle to embrace all who bear God's image.

Examen: Justice in Daily Life

Morning: Before beginning each day, ask yourself: "How can I give each person their due today? How can I honor God's image in myself and others?"

Evening: Reflect on the day: "Did I treat others with the dignity they deserve? Did I speak truth in love? Did I defend the vulnerable when I had the opportunity? Did I give God the worship and gratitude He deserves?"

Weekly: Consider your patterns: "Am I growing in my ability to recognize injustice? Am I becoming more courageous in defending what is right? Am I integrating justice and mercy in my relationships?"

Further Study

Scripture:

- Isaiah 1:17 - "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression"
- Micah 6:8 - "What does the Lord require but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly"
- Matthew 23:23 - "The weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness"
- Romans 2:14-15 - "The law written on their hearts"

Catechism:

- CCC 1807 - The virtue of justice
- CCC 1928-1948 - Respect for human dignity and equality
- CCC 1954 - Natural law and moral sense
- CCC 2401-2463 - Justice and solidarity

Saints:

- **St. Thomas Aquinas** - Doctor of justice and natural law
- **St. Thomas More** - Martyr for justice and conscience
- **St. Oscar Romero** - Defender of the poor and oppressed
- **St. Martin de Porres** - Justice for the marginalized
- **St. Catherine of Siena** - Reformer who spoke truth to power
- **St. Frances Cabrini** - Justice for immigrants and the displaced