

Justice in the Bible

Richard Dawson 14 July 2013

Deuteronomy 16¹⁸⁻²⁰ / Is 61¹⁻³ / Matt 5²¹⁻²⁴

When I was younger I often found myself feeling a great sense of injustice. Many times I would end up feeling I had borne the brunt of the blame for something when many others were involved. I remember one occasion in particular when I had been sent to a detention for some minor infringement by my French teacher. I turned up at the classroom where the detention was to be held to find a loan boy there already. He was a year older than me and when I walked in to sit down and begin my detention he told me in no uncertain terms to get out. When I refused he got up and stood over me and became quite threatening. Again I refused and a second later I found him on top of me hitting me. Feeling that this was a situation I'd rather not be in I wriggled free and found him off balance so pushed him and sat on him and at the very moment the French teacher walked in. Furious to find me beating up an older boy in the detention class I was handed 4 of the best whacks around the bottom and the boy got off scot free.

This, of course, pales into insignificance in relation to the injustices done to black Americans and Africans in South Africa and young women trafficked into the brothels of South East

Asia. Everywhere one looks injustice rears its ugly head and the question is, what should our response be to it?

I know many of you are very comfortable with the whole notion of our faith being tied up with issues of justice and, indeed, many of you have devoted incredible personal resources to righting issues of injustice both here in NZ and around the world.

But this view of justice isn't one that is shared universally. There's another view which sees the Christian faith not intersecting so strongly with issues of justice. This view understands faith as a much more singular issue between individuals and God. It also sees faith as something that is essentially spiritual in nature whereas what happens on earth is very fleeting and therefore not nearly so important. The question which is perhaps at the heart of this view is, 'Isn't the real issue of the Bible that of 'sin' and how to overcome it and isn't this precisely what Jesus came to do so why is justice such a big deal? If we fix sin won't we fix the problem of injustice?'

The answer to this is, quite frankly, not straight forward. Justice seems to be at the heart of God's intention both for humankind and for God's kingdom but understanding this relies on realizing a couple of things. The first thing is to understand what justice is in relation to God. Most of us have some idea of what justice is but the question is, is this how God sees it and what is justice in relation to God and we'll return to this in a moment? The other

thing we must always take into account is that because of sin no one ends up on the right side of God's justice without help and specifically without the help of Jesus. We are **justified** by virtue of one thing and one thing only – the Cross of Christ. Nothing we do or can do justifies us but only by faith in Christ do we gain a stake in the justice Jesus won for us. But let us go back to my first assertion – justice must be understood in relation to God.

One possible place to start with this is the 10 commandments because here we have what is often considered the heart of the law but also something that is closely related to God. These commandments are considered to lie at the heart of the law and the law is perhaps what we would normally associate with justice. Thus we have passages such as these which essentially comment on the greater purpose of the law...

Leviticus 19:15

'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

Deuteronomy 16:20

Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you.

But what is the basis of such law? Why should we do such things? What makes such behaviour right? The answer, interestingly, lies in the verse prior to the 10 commandments. Exodus 20².

² **“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.**

So we are called to justice not because of some arbitrary notion of right and wrong but because of the grace of God. God acts to save graciously by rescuing Israel from Egypt and we are called to imitate precisely this grace. We are made in the image of God and therefore are called to honour that image. Indeed, our true fulfillment as human beings lies in such an honouring. Indeed we are created to do precisely this!!

God is a just God. We are called to be just people. But what exactly does this mean? How is God just? What does God’s justice look like. Again there is much debate about this and there are clearly many facets to God’s justice from the forbidding of partiality to either rich or poor...

Leviticus 19:15

'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly.

To justice for the poor...

Proverbs 29:7

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

To justice for those who put their hope in God...

Isaiah 30:18

Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!

Firstly let me repeat that justice isn't some precondition or law which is demanded by God in order that we might be saved. God's justice is not like a line in the sand that must not be crossed over. Rather, God's justice is defined by Grace! We don't earn God's justice, we inherit it through the act of Christ on the Cross. This is the nature of God's justice – what He demands He also gives.

Let me illustrate this again from the 10 commandments. These act, in one sense at least, like a first definition of justice. From Exodus 20 we read thus in shortened form...

1. ³ "You shall have no other gods before me.
2. ⁴ "You shall not make for yourself an image or idol and worship it
3. ⁷ "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
4. ⁸ "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.
5. ¹² "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
6. ¹³ "You shall not murder.
7. ¹⁴ "You shall not commit adultery.
8. ¹⁵ "You shall not steal.
9. ¹⁶ "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

10. ¹⁷ “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, his wife his male or female servant his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

On the face of it all pretty straight forward really and we can read off basic principles of justice from these commands or at least from the last 6 let us say since the others have to do with more specifically religious concerns. And this all sounds pretty much like a law to most people. But there is a feature of all these commandments which betray a much deeper purpose for them. This is that the dominant theme underlying the last 6 commandments is that of **relationship**. Each commandment is not just a law but contains a vision of a holy relationship which the law tries to guard.

For example, honouring one’s father and mother calls us to honour those who have cared for us and taken responsibility for us when we needed it. Parents are the epitome of those who do this but we all know what it’s like to give and give to someone only to be taken for granted or, worse, betrayed. At heart here lies a fundamental principle of thankfulness and honouring of those who’ve served us. And let’s face it, sacrifice and service are so much easier when thankfulness is palpable.

You shall not murder sounds pretty obvious till we remember that Jesus interpreted this as referring to the hate and anger which prefigure murder...

²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matt 5)

So without taking away from the injunction not to murder we see that this is kind of the tip of the iceberg in a consideration of the dangers to relationship of harbouring hatred and anger. God’s intention then is to create the conditions in which relationships can thrive and this is what the justice of God is all about – it’s God’s preserving of the conditions for right relationship. Justice then, for Christians is the restoring of the relationship God seeks for all things – not just to the Creator but between creatures as well. It is not essentially punitive though occasionally that may be necessary. It can sometimes take the form of conformity to a law but law is just a small reflection of the breadth of God’s justice.

Now there's much more to be said here but let me finish with an amazing video from an incredibly brave woman who has been uncovering injustice for many years now. Her name is Charmian Gooch. She is Co-Founder and Co-Director, Global Witness, which addresses the links between natural resource exploitation and the funding of conflict and corruption. She jointly led Global Witness' first campaign, exposing the trade in timber between the Khmer Rouge and Thai logging companies and their political and military backers; developed and launched its second ground-breaking campaign, combating blood diamonds. She was one of those who exposed the whole trade in blood diamonds to begin with. I show for one reason and one reason only – to illustrate just how deep the problem of injustice is in the world today. It is, of course, as deep as sin because it is, in many ways, the ultimate expression of sin.