

O N E



WHAT IS DOING JUSTICE?

*And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice,
to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?*

Micah 6:8¹⁵

“I Didn’t Know Who Was Going to Shoot Me First”

I recently met with Heather, a woman who attends my church in New York City. After graduating from Harvard Law School she landed a lucrative job with a major law firm in Manhattan. It was a dream come true for most aspiring young professionals. She was a high-powered corporate lawyer, she was “living the life” in the big city, and yet it was all strangely unsatisfying. She wanted to make a difference in the lives of individuals, and she was concerned about those in society who could not afford the kind of fees her clients paid her firm. For

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a fraction of her former salary, she became an assistant district attorney for New York County, where so many of the criminals she prosecutes are those who have been exploiting the poor, particularly poor women.

When I was professor at a theological seminary in the mid-eighties, one of my students was a young man named Mark Gornik. One day we were standing at the copier and he told me that he was about to move into Sandtown, one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Baltimore. I remember being quite surprised. When I asked him why, he said simply, “to do justice.” It had been decades since any white people had moved *into* Sandtown. For the first couple of years there it was touch and go. Mark told a reporter, “The police thought I was a drug dealer, and the drug dealers thought I was a police officer. So, for a while there, I didn’t know who was going to shoot me first.” Yet over the years Mark, along with leaders in the community, established a church and a comprehensive set of ministries that have slowly transformed the neighborhood.¹⁶

Although both Heather and Mark were living comfortable, safe lives, they became concerned about the most vulnerable, poor, and marginalized members of our society, and they made long-term personal sacrifices in order to serve their interests, needs, and cause.

That is, according to the Bible, what it means to “do justice.”

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Justice Is Care for the Vulnerable

Micah 6:8 is a summary of how God wants us to live. To walk humbly with God is to know him intimately and to be attentive to what he desires and loves. And what does that consist of? The text says to “do justice and love mercy,” which seem at first glance to be two different things, but they are not.¹⁷ The term for “mercy” is the Hebrew word *chesedh*, God’s unconditional grace and compassion. The word for “justice” is the Hebrew term *mishpat*. In Micah 6:8, “*mishpat* puts the emphasis on the action, *chesedh* puts it on the attitude [or motive] behind the action.”¹⁸ To walk with God, then, we must do justice, out of merciful love.

The word *mishpat* in its various forms occurs more than two hundred times in the Hebrew Old Testament. Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably. So Leviticus 24:22 warns Israel to “have the same *mishpat* [“rule of law”] for the foreigner as the native.” *Mishpat* means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty. But *mishpat* means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means to give people their rights. Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle should be supported by a certain percentage of the people’s income. This

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support is described as “the priests’ *mishpat*,” which means their due or their right. So we read, “Defend the rights of the poor and needy” (Proverbs 31:9). *Mishpat*, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care.

This is why, if you look at every place the word is used in the Old Testament, several classes of persons continually come up. Over and over again, *mishpat* describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor—those who have been called “the quartet of the vulnerable.”¹⁹

*This is what the LORD Almighty says:
Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the immigrant or the poor.*

Zechariah 7:10–11

In premodern, agrarian societies, these four groups had no social power. They lived at subsistence level and were only days from starvation if there was any famine, invasion, or even minor social unrest. Today this quartet would be expanded to include the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless, and many single parents and elderly people.

The *mishpat*, or justness, of a society, according to

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the Bible, is evaluated by how it treats these groups. Any neglect shown to the needs of the members of this quartet is not called merely a lack of mercy or charity, but a violation of justice, of *mishpat*. God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we. That is what it means to “do justice.”

Justice Reflects the Character of God

Why should we be concerned about the vulnerable ones? It is because God is concerned about them. Consider the following texts:

He executes justice [mishpat] for the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, he lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves those who live justly. The LORD watches over the immigrant and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Psalm 146:7–9

The LORD your God . . . defends the cause [mishpat] of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the immigrant, giving him food and clothing.

Deuteronomy 10:17–18

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It is striking to see how often God is introduced as the defender of these vulnerable groups. Don't miss the significance of this. When people ask me, "How do you want to be introduced?" I usually propose they say, "This is Tim Keller, minister at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City." Of course I am many other things, but that is the main thing I spend my time doing in public life. Realize, then, how significant it is that the Biblical writers introduce God as "a father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:4-5). This is one of the main things he does in the world. He identifies with the powerless, he takes up their cause.

It is hard for us to understand how revolutionary this was in the ancient world. Sri Lankan scholar Vinoth Ramachandra calls this "scandalous justice." He writes that in virtually all the ancient cultures of the world, the power of the gods was channeled through and identified with the elites of society, the kings, priests, and military captains, not the outcasts. To oppose the leaders of society, then, was to oppose the gods. "But here, in Israel's rival vision," it is not high-ranking males but "the orphan, the widow, and the stranger" with whom Yahweh takes his stand. His power is exercised in history for their empowerment."²⁰ So, from ancient times, the God of the Bible stood out from the gods of all other religions as a God on the side of the powerless, and of justice for the poor.

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Is God on the Side of the Poor?

This emphasis in the Bible has led some, like Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, to speak of God's "preferential option for the poor."²¹ At first glance this seems to be wrong, especially in light of passages in the Mosaic law that warn against giving any preference to rich *or* poor (Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 1:16–17). Yet the Bible says that God is the defender of the poor; it never says he is the defender of the rich. And while some texts call for justice for members of the well-off classes as well, the calls to render justice to the poor outnumber such passages by a hundred to one.

Why? Rich people can certainly be treated unjustly, but philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff says it is a simple fact that the lower classes are "not only disproportionately vulnerable to injustice, but usually disproportionately actual victims of injustice. Injustice is not equally distributed."²² It stands to reason that injustice is easier to perform against people without the money or social status to defend themselves. The poor cannot afford the best legal counsel, as my friend Heather knew very well. The poor are more often the victims of robbery, one of the most common forms of injustice, and ordinarily law enforcement is much quicker and more thorough in its response to violence

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against the rich and powerful than against the poor. Wolterstorff concludes, “One has to decide where lie the greatest injustices and where lies the greatest vulnerability. Other things being equal, one focuses one’s attention on those.”²³ In short, since most of the people who are downtrodden by abusive power are those who had little power to begin with, God gives them particular attention and has a special place in his heart for them. He says:

Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. . . .

Proverbs 31:8

If God’s character includes a zeal for justice that leads him to have the tenderest love and closest involvement with the socially weak, then what should God’s people be like? They must be people who are likewise passionately concerned for the weak and vulnerable. God injected his concern for justice into the very heart of Israel’s worship and community life with these texts:

Cursed be anyone who withholds the justice due to the immigrant, the fatherless, and the widow. Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

Deuteronomy 27:19

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This is what the LORD says: “Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the immigrant, the fatherless, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.”

Jeremiah 22:3

Israel was charged to create a culture of social justice for the poor and vulnerable because it was the way the nation could reveal God’s glory and character to the world. Deuteronomy 4:6–8 is a key text where Israel is told that they should keep God’s commands so that all the nations of the world will look at the justice and peace of their society, based on God’s laws, and be attracted to God’s wisdom and glory.²⁴

This is why God can say that if we dishonor the poor we insult him, and when we are generous to the poor we honor him (Proverbs 14:31). If believers in God don’t honor the cries and claims of the poor, we don’t honor him, whatever we profess, because we hide his beauty from the eyes of the world. When we pour ourselves out for the poor—that gets the world’s notice. Even when Christians were a small minority in the Roman Empire, their startling charity to the poor evoked great respect from the populace. To honor him we must defend the poor and needy (Jeremiah 22:16).

Justice Is Right Relationships

We must have a strong concern for the poor, but there is more to the Biblical idea of justice than that. We get more insight when we consider a second Hebrew word that can be translated as “being just,” though it usually translated as “being righteous.” The word is *tzadeqah*, and it refers to a life of right relationships. Bible scholar Alec Motyer defines “righteous” as those “right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in life.”²⁵

This means, then, that Biblical righteousness is inevitably “social,” because it is about relationships. When most modern people see the word “righteousness” in the Bible, they tend to think of it in terms of private morality, such as sexual chastity or diligence in prayer and Bible study. But in the Bible *tzadeqah* refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts *all* relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity. It is not surprising, then, to discover that *tzadeqah* and *mishpat* are brought together scores of times in the Bible.

These two words roughly correspond to what some have called “primary” and “rectifying justice.”²⁶ Rectifying justice is *mishpat*. It means punishing wrongdoers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. Primary justice, or *tzadeqah*, is behavior that, if it was

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prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else.²⁷ Therefore, though *tzadeqah* is primarily about being in a right relationship with God, the righteous life that results is profoundly social. A passage in the book of Job illustrates what this kind of righteous or just-living person looks like:

I rescued the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to assist him. The man who was dying blessed me; I made the widow's heart sing. I put on righteousness [tzadeqah] as my clothing; justice [mishpat] was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the immigrant. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.

Job 29:12–17

If I have denied justice [mishpat] to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? . . . If I have denied the desires of the poor or let the eyes of the widow grow weary, if I have kept my bread to myself, not sharing it with the fatherless—but from my youth I reared him as would a father, and from my birth I guided the widow—if I have

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seen anyone perishing for lack of clothing, or a needy man without a garment, and his heart did not bless me for warming him with the fleece from my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, then let my arm fall from the shoulder, let it be broken off at the joint. . . . these also would be sins to be judged, for I would have been unfaithful to God on high.

Job 31:13–28

Francis I. Anderson points out in his commentary on Job that this is one of the most important texts in the Scripture for the study of Israelite ethics. It is a complete picture of how a righteous Israelite was supposed to live, “and to [Job], right conduct is almost entirely social. . . . In Job’s conscience . . . to omit to do good to any fellow human being, of whatever rank or class, would be a grievous offence to God.”²⁸

In Job’s inventory of his life we see all the elements of what it means to live justly and do justice. We see direct, rectifying justice when Job says, “I took up the case of the immigrant; I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth.” This means Job confronted people who exploited the vulnerable. In our world, this could mean prosecuting the men who batter, exploit, and rob poor women. But it could also mean Christians respectfully putting pres-

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sure on a local police department until they respond to calls and crimes as quickly in the poor part of town as in the prosperous part. Another example would be to form an organization that both prosecutes and seeks against loan companies that prey on the poor and the elderly with dishonest and exploitive practices.

Job also gives us many examples of what we could call primary justice or righteous living. He says that he is “eyes to the blind and feet to the lame,” and “a father to the needy.” To be a “father” meant that he cared for the needs of the poor as a parent would meet the needs of his children.²⁹ In our world, this means taking the time personally to meet the needs of the handicapped, the elderly, or the hungry in our neighborhoods. Or it could mean the establishment of new nonprofits to serve the interests of these classes of persons. But it could also mean a group of families from the more prosperous side of town adopting the public school in a poor community and making generous donations of money and pro bono work in order to improve the quality of the education.

In chapter 31 Job gives us more details about a righteous or just life. He fulfills “the desires of the poor” (verse 16). The word “desire” does not mean just meeting basic needs for food and shelter. It means that he turns the poor man’s life into a delight. Then he says that if he had not shared his bread or “the fleece

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from my sheep” with the poor, it would have been a terrible sin and offense to God (verses 23 and 28). This certainly goes beyond what today we would call “charity.” Job is not just giving handouts, but rather has become deeply involved in the life of the poor, the orphaned, and the handicapped. His goal for the poor is a life of delight, and his goal for the widow is that her eyes would “no longer be weary.” He is not at all satisfied with halfway measures for the needy people in his community. He is not content to give them small, perfunctory gifts in the assumption that their misery and weakness are a permanent condition.

When these two words, *tzadeqah* and *mishpat*, are tied together, as they are over three dozen times, the English expression that best conveys the meaning is “social justice.”³⁰ It is an illuminating exercise to find texts where the words are paired and to then to translate the text using the term “social justice.” Here are just two:

The Lord loves social justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

Psalms 33:5

And

This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his

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strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness and social justice on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:23–24

Justice Includes Generosity

Many readers may be asking at this point why we are calling private giving to the poor “justice.” Some Christians believe that justice is strictly *mishpat*—the punishment of wrongdoing, period. This does not mean that they think that believers should be indifferent to the plight of the poor, but they would insist that helping the needy through generous giving should be called mercy, compassion, or charity, not justice. In English, however, the word “charity” conveys a good but optional activity. Charity cannot be a requirement, for then it would not be charity. But this view does not fit in with the strength or balance of the Biblical teaching.

In the Scripture, gifts to the poor are called “acts of righteousness,” as in Matthew 6:1–2. Not giving generously, then, is not stinginess, but unrighteousness, a violation of God’s law. Also, we looked at Job’s

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description of all the things he was doing in order to live a just and righteous life in Job 31. He calls every failure to help the poor a sin, offensive to God's splendor (verse 23) and deserving of judgment and punishment (verse 28). Remarkably, Job is asserting that it would be a sin against God to think of his goods as belonging to himself alone. To not "share his bread" and his assets with the poor would be unrighteous, a sin against God, and therefore by definition a violation of God's justice.

Another passage, from the prophecy of Ezekiel, makes a very similar list to the one that we have in Job 31.

Suppose there is a righteous man [tzaddiq] who does what is just [mishpat] and right [tzadeqah]. He does not . . . oppress anyone, but returns what he took in pledge for a loan. He does not commit robbery but gives his food to the hungry and provides clothing for the naked. He does not lend at usury or take excessive interest.

Ezekiel 18:5, 7–8a

This just man does not use his economic position to exploit people who are in a weaker financial position. Most interesting is how the text pairs "he does not commit robbery" with the explanatory clause that he actively gives food and clothing to the poor. The

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implication is that if you do not actively and generously share your resources with the poor, you are a robber. You are not living justly.³¹ This connection of generosity and care with *mishpat* is not confined to this text. Each of the following texts calls those who do justice to share their resources with the needy, because God does:

He defends the cause [mishpat] of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.

Deuteronomy 10:18–19

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe him. . . ?

Isaiah 58:6–7

Despite the effort to draw a line between “justice” as legal fairness and sharing as “charity,” Ezekiel and Job make radical generosity one of the marks of living justly. The just person lives a life of honesty, equity, and generosity in every aspect of his or her life.

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As we continue our study, we will see there are valid reasons why many become concerned when they hear Christians talk about “doing justice.” Often that term is just a slogan being used to recruit listeners to jump on some political bandwagon. Nevertheless, if you are trying to live a life in accordance with the Bible, the concept and call to justice are inescapable. We do justice when we give all human beings their due as creations of God. Doing justice includes not only the righting of wrongs, but generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable. This kind of life reflects the character of God. It consists of a broad range of activities, from simple fair and honest dealings with people in daily life, to regular, radically generous giving of your time and resources, to activism that seeks to end particular forms of injustice, violence, and oppression.