

Why You Might Not Like Justice

If you're anything like me you've probably had heated discussions with friends about politics that only left everyone involved frustrated and no closer to understanding or common ground. You know how it goes - one party decries the injustices of the "other side", but when pressed the reasons they give for these claimed injustices don't hit home with people on the other side of the debate. It's easy to throw rocks, but when our very definitions of justice are different, it's nigh on impossible to make any real progress together. The reason it is not convincing to simply cry "injustice!" is that our society is deeply divided over the very definition of justice.

Nearly everyone thinks they are on justice's side. Both pro-life and pro-choice partisans frame their position as the one that is on the side of justice. That's why those movements have chosen their names - we don't speak of them as the anti-life and anti-choice movements. Both proponents and opponents of affirmative action insist that their way of equity is right and the other side is perpetrating unfairness. But underneath all the name-calling are sharp differences of opinion about what justice actually is.

Generally speaking, left-wingers think of it more in collective terms. They believe a low tax rate is unfair because it deprives the poor and minorities of the help they should get to overcome the less privileged setting they were born into. Right-wingers tend to think of justice on a more individualistic basis. They believe that a high tax rate is unjust because it robs hard workers of their due and disincentivises work and innovation. The fact is that the word "justice" does not have a definition in our culture that we can all agree on, so we just use it as a bludgeon. We self-righteously imply that those on the other side know they are simply being unjust. But do they? I don't think so.

Now, you may ask: isn't justice simply a matter of common sense? Isn't it simply respect for equality and individual freedom? But what do these terms "freedom" and "equality" really mean? When one challenges the other, which should we value more? If we can't objectively answer this, it won't help us in understanding justice at all. When we appeal to the principle of freedom we usually mean that people should be free to live as they desire, as long as they don't harm or diminish the freedom of others. The problem with this simple idea is that it assumes we all agree on what harm is. We don't. The reason we don't is that we have different views of what good, healthy, flourishing human life looks like.

Justice is served when people are acting as they ought to, in accord with morality and virtue. But where do we find our reference for morality? Our inability to answer this is one of the reasons why we have such gridlock over justice in our society. Underneath all notions of justice is a set of faith assumptions that are essentially religious and these are often not acknowledged. Professor of Law Steven D. Smith, reminds us that by the rules of secular discourse that reign particularly in government, politics and the academy, no one is allowed to ever bring their religious beliefs into a public argument. We are not supposed to talk about moral rights and moral evils, because that would get us into endless disagreements over which faith is true. We should only talk about justice in the supposedly neutral terms of freedom and equality that we all agree on. But we know this does not work because our ideas of justice are rooted in views of life that are faith assumptions.

To use a simple example, it is often argued that corporal punishment violates the rights and dignity of a child and therefore should be illegal. Smith reminds us, however, that there is no naturalistic, secular basis for the idea of human dignity, or that human beings are objectively valuable and inviolable. Historian Carl L Becker famously said that, from a strictly naturalistic viewpoint, human beings must be viewed as *"little more than a chance deposit on the surface of the world, carelessly*

thrown up between two ice ages by the same forces that rust iron and ripen corn." Stephen Hawking agrees that *"the human race is just a chemical sum on a moderate size planet"* and Harvard psychologist Stephen Pinker wrote an essay entitled *"The Stupidity of Dignity"*. The prominent philosopher John Gray, who teaches at the London School of Economics, writes of the self-deception of those who embrace naturalism (and so atheism) and still hold to the tenets of liberal humanism, such as belief in human dignity and rights. This is, after all, the growing voice of atheism.

Consider the issue of slavery. What made us decide people shouldn't be owned as slaves? It was because as a society we made the moral determination that all humans bear an equal dignity and worth and that the members of every race are fully human. So if we restrain freedom or excuse it in certain ways it is because we are making a moral determination. It's no good saying that the law should be neutral on moral and religious questions. The law has no choice as it is founded on pre-supposed moral determinations which are part of the moral and religious controversy. So beneath all accounts of justice are sets of essentially religious assumptions that we are not allowed to admit or discuss, so our society stays in a deadlock over these issues. We can't agree on what justice is because we can't talk about our underlying beliefs.

Now I guess you could ask: *"are you claiming that only Christians can know moral right from wrong?"* That's clearly not the case. The first book of the Bible describes how God made humanity in His likeness and image, so it is for this reason that Jews and Christians have a uniquely strong reason to believe in the value and dignity of humanity. What's more, this belief in an imprinted divine-like nature also gives them cause to believe that everyone possesses a moral intuition, a conscience. We have a basic intuition of justice because justice is stamped on our very being. Paul the apostle taught that those who have never read or known the scriptures, nevertheless *"show that the requirements of God's moral law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness"*. There is, as it were, a *"general revelation"* of the sacredness and dignity of each human which we know intuitively.

It was during the Christian jurisprudence of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that this intuition gave birth to the concept of human rights, rooted particularly in the Christian doctrine that all human beings are created in the image of God, and therefore have inherent dignity. If we actually lived as if we really believed that all human beings are merely *"a chance deposit on the surface of the world"* we would have no moral restraint. We would consider every act of supposed heroism and atrocity to be equally meaningless. That's not to say that atheists are evil, just that they are *inconsistent*. However, thankfully most of us live according to the moral standpoint that human beings are a sacred creation of God. So, agreeing on the right way to value things is necessary for us to start considering justice. Now *"valuing things"* is always based on beliefs about the purpose of life, human nature and right vs wrong, all of which are moral and religious considerations. Without a purpose, it is impossible to determine how we should live. How do we determine what is good or evil behaviour? Aristotle and his followers' answer was basically: unless you can determine what we are here for, you can't answer that!

The conclusion is that we must begin again to talk about moral and religious belief in public discourse if we are to get a proper definition of justice. The issue, however, is that the rules of secular public discourse will not allow us to talk about such matters, since, it is feared, discussions of religious beliefs will lead to endless disagreement, largely because we live with the illusions that we can achieve moral and religious neutrality on the secular grounds that we are merely a purposeless by-product of matter and its movement. Since we can't talk about our real differences, we simply make power plays to weaken and marginalise our opponents, not persuade them. Even the U.S president Barack Obama said: *"Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square. Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King - indeed, the majority of the great*

reformers in American history - were not only motivated by faith but repeatedly used religious language to argue their cause. So to say that men and women should not inject their 'personal morality' into public policy debates is a practical absurdity. Our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition." After all, the pursuit of justice is essentially religious in nature.

How to live justly - the Christian response

Taking into consideration what's been said, now we will add the Christian perspective into the discussion of justice. We get more insight when we look into the root of the word "*justice*". There are two Hebrew words translated as justice, commonly referenced throughout the ancient scriptures.

The first of these is '*tzedakah*' meaning 'being just' though usually translated as "*being righteous*." This refers to a life of right relationships. As Alec Motyer said, to live 'righteously' is to be "*right with God and therefore committed to putting right all other relationships in life*." This means that righteousness is inevitably 'social' because it is about relationships. Tzedakah (being just) refers to day-to-day living in which a person conducts all relationships in family and society with fairness, generosity, and equity.

The second word translated as justice is 'Mishpat', meaning 'rectifying justice'. It means punishing wrongdoers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. This understanding of justice is therefore secondary to tzedakah because if everyone lives in right relationships with all they come into contact with, then rectifying justice would be unnecessary. So where righteousness lacks, rectifying justice becomes necessary.

But it gets deeper than that. There's a lot of depth to tzedakah, after all, what does it truly mean to live right towards others? In the scripture, gifts to the poor are called "*acts of righteousness*", so to not give generously is not merely stinginess but actually unrighteousness, a violation of God's Law. The implication is that if you do not actively and generously share your resources with the poor, you are not living justly.

Voltaire claimed, "*when it is a question of money, everybody shares the same religion*." However, Jesus stands far above every other religious leader and philosopher of morality. In the gospels, Jesus exhorts his disciples to "*sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys*." He also famously told the rich young ruler that to follow him he must sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. That sounds like a big ask, doesn't it? So what do we say to such strong injunctions? We shouldn't be too quick to jump up and explain away Jesus' challenging words, claiming perhaps that his command to the rich young ruler isn't universal. However, what was Jesus getting at when he told the man to sell everything? If we look at Jesus' encounter with the rich tax collector, who converted and then happily told Jesus that he was giving one half of all his wealth to the poor and paid back four times to those he had cheated - Jesus responded positively. He didn't say, "*Hold up buddy, that's only half, that's not enough!*" Therefore, the point which Jesus was making was at least this - that his believers should not see any of their money as their own and they should be profoundly involved with and generous to the poor. Everything we have belongs to God, and by extension to the poor.

Yet while I write these words, I feel a tightening conviction. Am I really generous? Are you really generous? I certainly haven't acted as generously as this tax collector and don't know anyone who has. Someone may say "*I haven't given away all I can to the poor but at least my heart's in the right place*", so we give a little to help those in need while content in our comfortable lifestyles. But do not be deceived - Jesus said "*you'll know them by their fruit*," so God sees your heart by how you act.

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but a generous heart does not hold onto the comforts and material possessions of this world while knowing someone in genuine need. We must pause to make sure our lifestyle is consistent with what we profess to believe. Are you willing to sacrifice your comforts and material possessions to help those in need? If you say you are, then have you previously done so? If not, should you be so confident?

Some think Jesus was only speaking to people who had a problem with money, like greed or idolatry, as if it's fine to be a billionaire so long as we ignore the money as much as we ignore the poor. But Jesus warned that the deceitfulness of wealth blinds us and chokes the word of God from taking root in our lives. So if wealth can deceive, how would you or I know we had a problem with it? By definition, we're blind to our blind spots. Perhaps it's a much safer idea to assume we do indeed have a problem with money, especially if we're too quick to explain away Jesus' challenging words about it.

Jesus not only echoed the old testament's zeal for the cause of the vulnerable, but he also shared the prophets' penetrating use of justice as a sign of true faith. As we've described, in the biblical idea of justice, generous grace is not opposed to justice, but an expression of it. In Christ, we receive grace, unmerited favour, and an encounter with grace inevitably leads to a life of justice.

Throughout the Old Testament, many of the prophets levelled the charge that while the people attended worship, observed all religious regulations and took pride in their biblical knowledge, nevertheless they took advantage of the weak and vulnerable. Because of this the prophets concluded that their religious activity made a mockery of God. A lack of justice is a sign that someone had a wrong attitude toward God. Instead they were prideful and self-focused, despite all the prayers and religious observances they hid behind. Jesus made clear that you can look very religious but if you neglect justice and the love of God, it doesn't count for much. Like the older prophets, Jesus taught that a lack of concern for the poor is not a minor lapse, but reveals that something is wrong with someone's heart. Then he prescribes a startling remedy: *"You religious leaders clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed... Give what is inside to the poor, and everything will be clean for you."* The metaphor is striking. The state of one's possessions signifies the state of one's heart.

There is something important to re-emphasize while we talk about this: Jesus did not say that generosity to the poor was a means of getting salvation, but rather it was the sign that you already had salvation, that true, saving faith was already present. Grace transforms us to live generously. How does he show that? He said that *"when you embrace the poor, you embrace me,"* and *"when you ignore the poor, you ignore me."* This meant that one's heart attitude to the poor reveals one's heart attitude toward Christ. No heart that loves Christ can be cold and neglectful to the vulnerable and needy. Now it's important that we don't limit our care to just those of the same social class and means. We instinctively tend to place limits on who we go out of our way for. We do it for people like us, and for people whom we like. But Jesus made no distinction, he added no filter. Anyone at all in need, regardless of race, political views, class or religion, is your neighbour. And Jesus' idea of justice is loving our neighbour as much as we love ourselves.

What motivates Justice?

This all sounds great, doesn't it? It's easy to agree that we should have an open and generous society, caring for those less fortunate than ourselves, yet many of us really aren't very motivated to actually be open, generous and caring ourselves.

I remember a few years ago meeting a friend for lunch. We could see this homeless person from the window and discussed how good it would be to help that person, how great and counter-cultural it

would be to just invite the homeless man to join us for lunch or something like that. But guess what? While we discussed this, we happily had our lunch and walked away afterwards. The problem is this: how do we motivate people to do what they ought to do for the hungry and poor of the world?

One of the concerns is that we now live in a secular relativistic age in which it is virtually impossible to convince people that there is an absolute moral standard they must adhere to, whether they like it or not. For example, in a secular worldview where we are just an accidental by-product of time-and-chance, guided by mindless natural mechanisms in a purposeless, ultimately meaningless universe, why should I care about a stranger, a person who I don't know, a person whose habits I may dislike or even resent? The traditional answer was *"because you have a moral obligation to that stranger."* But in a secular world we can no longer give that answer because who is to say what the universal moral obligations are?

This is why we should not overlook the powerful resource the Christian worldview offers when it provides not merely the bare ethical obligation for doing justice, but also a motivation for doing it, not to mention two millennia of practice in almost every nation and culture.

The biblical motivation for doing justice can be found in the story of creation (however that process was); *"God created man in his own image."* But what does being an *"image"* mean? It conveys the idea of a work of art, an expression of the artist's nature. Human beings are not accidents but creations. Without a belief in creation, we are forced to face the implication that ultimately there is no good reason to treat humans as having dignity. As Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. famously said: *"When one thinks coldly, I see no reason for attributing to man a significance different in kind from that which belongs to a baboon or a grain of sand."* Now the word *"image"* in this context means to resemble, as a mirror reflects and represents an object. A mirror can't depict an object in all its dimensions, yet the image upon it is a true likeness.

What is it about us that reflects God? Over the years thinkers have pointed to human rationality, personality, and creativity, or to our moral and aesthetic sense and our deep need for and ability to give love in relationships. All of this and much more goes into being the image of God, though I don't think you can really nail it down to a list. Rather, the sacredness of God has in some ways been imparted to humanity, so that every human life is sacred and every human has dignity. When God put his image upon us, we became beings of infinite, inestimable value. The image of God carries with it the right to not be harmed or mistreated. So regardless of your record or character, all of us have an irreducible glory and significance because God *"loves all that he has made"* (Psalms 145:9,17). He loves even those who turn away from him (Ezekiel 33:11, John 3:16).

What happens if we remove God from the picture? Aristotle famously said that some people are born to be slaves. Why did he think that? Aristotle and other greek philosophers believed that the dignity of life resided in certain capacities, in particular, rationality. In their view, rational beings have dignity and rights worthy of respect, but not all human beings were equally rational. Aristotle wrote: *"it is clear, then, that some men are by nature free, and other slaves, and that for these latter slavery is both expedient and right."* It would be shocking to hear something like this today, wouldn't it? But Aristotle was merely reflecting our natural intuitions. Does our natural experience of life lead us to believe that every human is equally valuable and has equal dignity? Certainly not. The default mode of the human heart is to label some people *"barbarians."* We still do it today although we use modern terminology. Just look at the news - rightful outrage and grief over terrorist attacks at home and on people who look like us, but numb indifference over similar major atrocities in far off nations.

The doctrine of the image of God, however, allows no such distinctions. Martin Luther King Jr. clearly made the case that the doctrine of the image of God was at the very heart of the Civil Rights Movement. He said: *"The whole concept of the 'image of God,' is the idea that all men have*

something within them that God injected. Not that they have substantial unity with God, but that every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity... We will know one day that God made us to live together as brothers and to respect the dignity and worth of every man." The image of God brings humility before the greatness of each human being made and loved by God.

There is another important way in which the doctrine of creation motivates Christians toward sharing their resources with others. If God is the Creator of all things, that means everything we have in life belongs to God. In Genesis 1, God gave Adam and Eve "*dominion*" over the creation. This is a call to stewardship, but "*the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it*" (Psalms 24:1). In other words, God gave humanity authority over the world's resources but *not* ownership. This understanding changes our attitude from one of entitlement to one of responsibility. The steward of an estate has a certain authority over the estate. They may live comfortably and enjoy the fruits of their labour, but they don't make the mistake of thinking that the wealth under their care is all theirs. They are tasked with managing it in a way that pleases the owner. In this mindset, our wealth, if we are fortunate to have any, should not be viewed as our own. Bruce Waltke concludes, "*the righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves.*" A lack of generosity refuses to acknowledge that your assets are not really yours, but God's. Self-indulgence and materialism should be given up and replaced by a sacrificial lifestyle of giving to those in need.

Before I conclude I want to reiterate a key point, and that is that justice for the poor is connected not to guilt but to grace. Jesus said, "*it is more blessed to give than to receive*". To be a disciple of Christ (referred to as a Christian) also means we must be like him in giving. "*Though he was rich, for our sakes he became poor.*" Now people may object to generosity to the poor by saying "*the poor may abuse it.*" Sure, they might. But Christ could have said the same, with far greater truth. He still laid his life down; he still gave up his wealth. On the cross, Jesus, who deserved acquittal and freedom, got condemnation, so that we who deserve condemnation for our sins can receive acquittal. This was the ultimate instance of God's identification with the poor and marginalized. He stood in the place of our spiritual poverty and bankruptcy and paid our debt. A life paid out in doing justice for the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true gospel faith.

This article references 'Generous Justice' by Timothy Keller.