

The Biblical Call for Justice

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The word “justice” can evoke all kinds of meanings for the evangelical church today. In some sense, we have lost a Biblical understanding of the term and have replaced with a variety of cultural understandings. For many the word is often negatively associated with social or religious liberals and is tied to the idea of “social justice” in a way that undermines a genuine focus on the gospel. If the term “justice” is used in a positive way among evangelicals, the dominant sense of the word has simply come to mean “divine retribution” or “punishment for sins.” A common statement from the lips of many well-intentioned Christians sounds something like this: “We really want mercy and grace from God- not justice. If we received justice we would be greatly disappointed.” The popular television series “Law and Order” and justice as the punishment of criminals, or Dostoyevsky’s classic “Crime and Punishment” are the categories that come to mind for many with the term “justice.” Consequently, whenever the word “justice” occurs in a biblical text, it is assumed it must have some reference to divine judgment of evil. The perception is fed by a logic something like this: God’s “justice” requires the punishment of sin; God would not be truly “holy” or “just” if he failed to deal with the guilt of sin; the gift of God was to send his Son to take the punishment for sin upon himself, in our place; the good news is, “Christ became sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). The underlying conclusion: whenever the word “justice” appears in the Bible, it must be addressing these ultimate issues of God’s commitment to punish sin and the wonderful answer for us is the message of God’s grace in Christ Jesus.

It needs to be plainly stated that the theology surrounding and tied to this second use of the term “justice” is absolutely true and nothing about the Christian life or the work of the kingdom can ever be separated from the Person of Christ and his atonement. However, the fundamental problem is that all this great theology is not actually tied to the term “justice” in most of Scripture. When God urges us as his people to “seek justice” (Isaiah 1:17), he is not telling us to go into the world and make sure people know they are going to be punished for evil (although confronting people with the reality of sin and the need for repentance is central to Gospel proclamation). When Amos calls us to “let justice roll down as waters” (Amos 5:24), he is not calling for punishment to flow. While there are many biblical passages that declare God will punish sin, the most common Hebrew term to express this action of God’s judgment against the rebellious is not the Hebrew word for “justice”, which is “mishpat,” but the word “paqad,” which we translate “punish”. The word for “justice” in most instances is not predominately linked to or used in connection with this action of punishing sinners.

What is the predominate, Scriptural use of the term “justice”? The verb form of “justice” / “mishpat” is the Hebrew word “shafat”, and means “to judge” or “to rule.” To reaffirm, God’s role as Judge clearly does include the idea of punishing or pronouncing sentence against someone. But it also has the positive meaning of ruling or judging “on

behalf of someone”, in a positive sense of “governing for, or establishing righteousness” for them.ⁱ It is this second meaning of “justice-mishpat” that is the focus of most Old Testament passages describing the “justice of God”, i.e. describing God’s commitment to establish righteousness on behalf of his people; his promise to take up their cause for good. It is also this more pro-active, positive use of justice that the Old Testament highlights as the character of God’s people who are called to be a people of “justice” in the world; a people who work for the establishment of what is good and right for those in need. It is also carried over into the New Testament in Romans 3 (and elsewhere) when Paul describes God’s action of “justifying” sinners (Rom 3:23-26). God not only forgives sins through the substitutionary work of Christ, he also “establishes righteousness in his people” as a gift; that is, he “justifies” us.

A brief look at the relevant Scriptures reveal this positive use of the word “justice”/ “mishpat” has been translated as “justice” and “just” some one hundred fifty-one (151) times in the New International Version of the Old Testament (not including the negative forms of “injustice” or “unjust”). There are scattered uses of the term “justice” / “mishpat” in special circumstances - four (4) times in reference to God’s discipline of his children (Jeremiah 10:24, 30:11, 46:28), one (1) time in 2 Chronicles 12:6, thirteen (13) times in the book of Job, twenty-four (24) times used as a legal term, either concerning court procedures or bribery (Ex 23:2, Lev 19:15)- but the vast majority of the time, in one hundred eight (108) references, the Scriptures describe God’s “justice” as “governing for righteousness” and not “judgment against evil.”

As a matter of record, in seventy-seven (77) of those one hundred eight (108) occurrences in the Old Testament, the term “mishpat” / “justice” is directly linked to “zedek” / “righteousness”. It is so closely linked that some Old Testament scholars have understood the two terms as a Hebrew parallelism, in particular a synthetic or constructive parallelism.ⁱⁱ The words do not express identical thoughts, but they have a progressive correspondence. Righteousness describes the moral goodness of God’s character that he intends for men to reflect as created in his image. Justice reflects the implementation of that righteousness / goodness on behalf of someone who needs help in receiving this righteousness in their life.

The first occurrence of this parallelism is in I Kings 10:9, when the Queen of Sheba acknowledges the greatness of Solomon’s reign and declares, “Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice (mishpat) and righteousness (zedek).” Earlier, Solomon had asked God for the gift of wisdom and the Lord responded by blessing him because in asking for wisdom, he was really asking for “discernment in administering justice (mishpat)” (1 Kings 3:11). The illustration the author of Kings chooses to demonstrate Solomon’s wisdom is his exercise of justice on behalf of a prostitute; not as punishment, but as bringing what is good and right into her life by restoring her baby to her (1 Kings 3:16ff).

This parallelism of “justice and righteousness” is used repeatedly throughout the Psalms to describe the rule of God, who is *The King*, from whom Solomon derived his position. Notice how closely the words justice and righteousness are linked:

Ps 9:8 “He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice.”

Ps 33:5 “The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.” Cf Psalm 11:7; 36:6; 37:6; 45:6-7; 72:1; 72:2; 89:14; 97:2; 99:4; 103:6; 106:3; 112:5-6.

Even a passage that might, at first glance, appear to be a call for God’s justice as vengeance against the wicked is, in context, a cry for God to counteract that evil by taking up the cause of righteousness for his people.

“Arise, O LORD, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. Let the assembled peoples gather around you. Rule over them from on high; let the LORD judge the peoples. Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High.” Psalm 7:6-8

The focus of God’s “mishpat” / “justice” is towards his people, not directed at the enemy. While David cries out for God to be aroused in anger against his enemies, the focus of God’s decree of “justice” is on behalf of his own people, “Rule over [your assembled peoples] from on high.... Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness....” David’s plea is not about self-righteousness before God, but a call for God to work both on his behalf and on behalf of the people of God, because David is committed to the same issues of justice and righteousness as God is.

The word “justice” used in these contexts carries with it the idea of “the active implementation of righteousness.” To “maintain justice” is to “constantly do what is right” (Psalm 106:3). The pursuit of justice is a commitment to ensure people are being treated with God’s goodness, as they ought to be; of making sure God’s goodness and righteousness are brought into their lives. This provides a significant, practical definition for the church and the people of God in understanding what it means to be a part of and to pursue “the kingdom of God”: the church is the gathering of God’s people from among all the nations of the earth who will actively pursue doing the good (justice and righteousness) we were originally created for (Gen 1:3, 9, 12, 18, 21, then Gen 1:26,27, Mt 5:16; Gal 6:10; Eph 2:10; 1 Peter 2:12).

The remaining references to “mishpat”-justice throughout the Old Testament more specifically tie God’s justice to an active care for the powerless and disenfranchised- the poor, the widow, the fatherless and the immigrant. Righteousness and justice concerns for the poor and needy are in fact, at the center of God’s character. This is part of the glory of the God we serve. He is not a God who is uncaring or marginally interested in the plight of the oppressed. Unlike the false “gods” of the nations who justify oppression (Psalm 82:1-4), it is the very character and nature of the one, true God that in his goodness, love and justice he pays special attention to all the oppressed of the earth (Psalm 72:11-14, 103:6, cf John 10:34-38). The clear link between the terms mishpat /justice and “zedek” / righteousness and the oppressed is emphasized in the following Psalms:

“He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.” Psalm 9:8, 9

“Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice.” Psalm 72:1, 2

“The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.” Psalm 103:6

“I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. Surely the righteous will praise your name and the upright will live before you.” Psalm 140:12, 13

The Prophets call the people of God away from idolatry and back to the true worship of God and make a moral connection between idolatry and this issue of justice for the poor and oppressed. Idolatry and oppression are two sins that are like flip sides of the same coin. Through idolatry they changed the very nature of the God they wanted to worship, and then in practice moved from justice and righteousness to oppression. As the Prophets urged the people of God to practice the justice he created them for, they described Israel’s failure to take responsibility for the poor as part of the core reason they were being exiled.

“...wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice; encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. ‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.’” Isaiah 1:16-18

“See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her-- but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them.” Isaiah 1:21-24

"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, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.” Isaiah 58:-8; cf Jer 21:12; 22:13-16; Ezekiel 22:29; Amos 2:6, 7; 5:7-12; Zechariah 7:9,10; Malachi 3:5

The promise of the Messiah and the glory of God’s kingdom rule and reign through him in Isaiah 9 and 11 is centered on these issues of justice / righteousness, and is tied

specifically to the poor and needy (a summary phrase for the widow, orphan, immigrant and poor).

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.” Isaiah 9:6,7

“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.” Isaiah 11:2-4

These words become so closely linked in the Old Testament that the prophet Micah can give the people of God a summary of the kind of obedience God is looking for among his people and not even mention the word “zedek” / “righteousness”, but simply say, “He has showed you what is good.... To act justly (mishpat) and to love mercy....” (Micah 6:8). When Amos makes his well-known cry, “But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:24), it is set in the earlier context of his prophetic complaint for their failure to do these things: “You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.” Amos 5:12

It is this same embracive use of the term “justice” / “mishpat” to represent the broader scope of justice / righteousness that is used by Isaiah in chapter 42 to define the nature of Christ’s ministry as “the servant” of the Lord.

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope." Isaiah 42:1-4

When Jesus started his official ministry, it is no accident his inaugural address in the Nazareth synagogue began with a quote of Isaiah 58 and 61,

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19

As Jesus fulfilled his ministry, he went about preaching forgiveness and “doing justice” - bringing the goodness of God’s love into people’s lives by working justice /

righteousness on their behalf: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, eating lunch with a tax collector and drinking water with an outcast Samaritan woman, and in each event, telling the good news of the free forgiveness of sins.

In the book of Acts, Luke tells us he previously wrote in his Gospel what Jesus “*began* to do and to teach,” (Acts 1:1). The story of the church is a continuation of that ministry of Christ as “his body” in the world, continuing to bring the good news of the kingdom of God both by preaching repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name (Acts 2:14ff) and by doing Spirit-led deeds of justice / righteousness:

“Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off-- for all whom the Lord our God will call.... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” Acts 2:38-39, 44-45

“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Acts 4:31-35

A biblical understanding of these terms “justice” / “mishpat” and “righteousness” / “zedek” is at the heart of knowing what it means to “seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness.” Pursuing kingdom righteousness means making the priority of our lives the pursuit of God’s righteousness and justice in every area of life, with a particular emphasis on giving ourselves for the care of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant. A preaching of the Gospel that leaves out this commitment to deeds of justice and righteousness has always had a detrimental effect on the overall health of the church and misses the richness of God’s love in proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. The great command and promise of our Savior and King for going out to the nations is to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**, and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

It might be argued by some that these ought to be seen as acts of mercy and compassion, not justice, because none of these people were deserving of these acts of kindness. Of course any act of goodness that comes from God to us is a gracious gift because it is always contrary to what we deserve. In a world which is filled with the injustice sin creates, and where everyone is both a victim and a perpetrator of injustice, part of the great news of God’s kingdom is that he has come to graciously bring into people’s lives

the kind of righteousness / justice they should have been experiencing and extending all along.

This understanding of justice does have implications for the evangelical church as we talk about “mercy ministries” or “acts of mercy”. The term we translate “mercy” in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word “hesed” and carries the idea of covenantal “goodness and kindness.” Mercy in this context (as in Micah 6:8- to love mercy) is not primarily the idea of giving someone what they don’t deserve. That is grace, and grace truly marks the nature of God and his people in everything we do. But mercy – “hesed” – has the sense of following through on a covenantal commitment to fulfill God’s goodness and kindness to one another, especially in times of severe need. The Lord “requires of us” to act justly and love mercy (Amos 6:8).

Culturally defined, the idea of mercy too often has a paternalistic sense of one person giving another person help, even though the recipient doesn’t deserve it; a sense of “option” for the one giving mercy, and a sense of ingratiating for the one receiving it. Pagan religions call their people to such acts of “charity”. In Hinduism if someone is suffering or poor, it is because of failure in their past lives. In Islam, poverty, ill health, or desperate circumstances are because of someone’s failure in their present life. Even Christianity can have this misperception- compare John 9 and the disciples’ questions about the man born blind; “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” The assumption too often is that poverty and difficult circumstances stem from sin. Jesus’ answer is startling to our basic misconceptions; “Neither sinned. But this happened that God might be glorified”, i.e. that God would Sovereignly use the devastation of the fall to show his kindness in this man’s life. In Hinduism and Islam, the “righteous” do acts of charity for the poor and needy, but the real focus and end result is to build or add to a record of righteousness for the person doing the charity. For the true God of the Covenant and his people, there is a much different perspective. The poor and marginalized are, according to God, mostly in their condition because they are oppressed, and as such are in need of someone to work justice-righteousness on their behalf. While the book of Proverbs does address the issue of the poor who are lazy and unwise, it only talks about the poor negatively four (4) times out of the forty (40) times it mentions them (Prov 10:4; 20:13; 21:17; 23:21). The other thirty-six times Proverb speaks of the poor in the same way the rest of Scripture does- as the oppressed of the earth who need justice (mishpat) exercised on their behalf (Prov 13:23; 19:17; 22:9; cf Isa 3:14, 15; 10:2). The acts of kindness and charity are to flow out of a people who have graciously received righteousness themselves as a gift, and their charity is free to be defined by the need of the person they are helping. That is why the “good Samaritan” in Luke 10 does more than simply give the beaten victim a bandage for his wounds. In addition, he follows through and makes sure all his basic needs are provided for.

When we come to the New Testament, although the language changes from Hebrew to Greek, the moral nature and purposes of God for his people do not change. The use of the phrase “justice and righteousness” is wrapped up in one term in the Greek New Testament – “dikaiosune” which is simply translated “righteousness”, but could just as faithfully be translated with the word “justice.” Spanish and French translations of the

New Testament Scriptures generally use the word justice, “justicia” (Sp) and “justice” (Fr), instead of righteousness.

When Jesus was baptized by an astonished John the Baptist, he told John, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). Jesus submitted to this, even though he was already God, as the second Adam, because he knew it would require the power of the Holy Spirit to carry out the “mishpat” / “justice” (Old Testament summary word) – “dikaiosune” / “righteousness” (New Testament summary word) God had promised in Isaiah 9, 11 and 42.

As Jesus announces the righteousness of the kingdom of God in the Sermon the Mount, he ties it into the justice / righteousness the Law required all along:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” Matt 5:17-19

He then goes on to exhort us, “For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 5:20. There has been a long standing misunderstanding in much of the evangelical church that has presumed the Pharisees actually maintained outward obedience to the Law, but failed in the attitudes of their hearts. This misunderstanding has suggested that the righteousness Christ speaks of goes deeply into heart attitudes, while the righteousness of the Pharisees consisted merely of external conformity to the Law. A proof text example for this would be Matthew 5:27-28, where Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” The conclusion includes reasoning something like this: “Keeping the Law is not enough. Anyone can care for the poor and oppressed. Many people don’t commit adultery. Even lots of ‘benevolent’ non-Christians do that. What God is interested in is the heart motivation and attitudes behind all that behavior. Let’s not talk about obedience to the Law; let’s talk about heart attitudes and heart issues- the real, spiritual issues of sin.” An example of this standard theology is reflected in one recent author’s response to a proposed question about the revolution of God’s kingdom:

“If ‘lawlessness’ is anti-revolutionary, then does the revolution of God’s kingdom involve ‘keeping the law’, despite Paul’s apparently contrary teaching about Christ as the end of the Law? The answer is yes and no: the righteousness of the revolution of God is not the righteousness of the Old Testament law, but the higher righteousness of Jesus, who fulfilled and surpassed the old legal standards and whose Spirit inspires his followers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The same author hints at a common understanding of the Pharisees as “external law keepers” when he later describes the Pharisees in his commentary about Jesus’ story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:

“They prided themselves on their scrupulous adherence to the law of God, and indeed they went beyond the letter of the Old Testament law in their personal lives. Although the Pharisees often get a bad press in the New Testament, this should not obscure the fact that they were an outstandingly religious group.” (Wenham, p.117, 118)

However, a closer look at the righteousness of the Pharisees reveals something more sinister. It is true the Pharisees did “externalize” the law, and did not deal with issues of the heart. But to conclude that they kept the Law outwardly is a huge misconception. The full extent and pernicious character of their sin was to reduce and pervert the obedience the Law actually called for, so that while they claimed to be pursuing righteousness as spiritual leaders of God’s people, they were actually perverting and falling far short of the justice-righteousness the Law required. They are guilty of both failures – the sinful thoughts of the heart, and the failure to observably, externally obey the commands. These sins go together. Some of Jesus’ more pointed rebukes of the Pharisees bring this to light:

“[Jesus] replied, ‘Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.’ And he said to them: ‘You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: ‘Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban’ (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.” Mark 7:6-13

“As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.” Mark 12:38-40

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” Matt 23:23-24

When Jesus says our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees, he is not saying our righteousness is “of the heart”, while the righteousness of the Pharisees was “an external obedience to the Law.” He is saying our obedience must reflect the whole reality of the Law- both a heart attitude and an actual outward obedience to the justice / righteousness the Law requires. We must do more than tithe our “spices”, we must live out justice!

The climactic explanation of the good news of God’s grace for us in Christ is that we receive the power for this righteousness as a gift from Christ, including the gift of the Spirit to empower and lead us. Christ died for us, that we might become “the righteousness (justice-mishpat; righteousness-zedek) of God in him (2 Cor 5:21). As Paul goes on to tell us in Romans 8, now, through the law of the Spirit of life at work in us, we are free to fully meet the righteous requirements of the Law. We can be confident as we pursue this righteousness that God will direct our steps both because he has prepared “good works” for us to do in advance (Eph 2:10) and because he has gifted the church with a variety of pastors, teachers, apostles and prophets to equip us for “works of service” (Eph 4:12).

What kind of conclusions can we draw from this understanding of justice? Here are at least two practical applications for the church.

First, our call to do “justice” in this world; that is, to seek to bring God’s righteousness and goodness to practical expression in all people’s lives, both to the world in general and in the church (Mt 5:14-16,38-48; Luke 6:27-36; Acts 2,4; Gal 6:10; 1 Peter 2:12; 1 John 3:16-20), is not an option for Christians or for the church. It is a fundamental, covenantal obligation, responsibility and great joy (1 John 5:1-5). Even “mercy” (hesed) is not an “option” for Christians to ponder over. It is a covenantal commitment God has called us to (Micah 6:8) and is part of the glorious expression that Peter describes as our “participation in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:3-9).

Second, this understanding of righteousness and justice gives practical expression to the kingdom of God. God’s kingdom is his place of rule for the purposes of bringing his justice to expression (Isa 42:1-5), carried out by the presence of Christ Col 1:13), through the Spirit, working in the hearts of his people (Luke 17:21). Too much of the church does not know or act like they exist for the purpose of proclaiming the “good news of the kingdom” - that through the death and resurrection of Christ we have been forgiven and brought into a relationship with God where our entire lives are now redirected from self-centered living to pursuing the establishment of God’s kingdom – his goodness, love, righteousness and justice- in the lives of others: our spouses and children (Eph 5), our workplace (Eph 6), our respective nations and communities (1 Pet 2:12-18), the church (Acts 4:32-35), and especially in the lives of the marginalized- the poor, the widow, the orphan and the immigrant (James 1:27).

When Jesus announces, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20), he is not saying only poor people can be saved. He is saying the very nature and purpose of God’s kingdom rule is focused on those most in need, those most oppressed and those most marginalized. The kingdom has come with them in view. The

amazing nature of God's love is that he can save anyone, including the wealthy or powerful oppressor (cf Zacchaeus, Luke 19 and Saul of Tarsus, Acts 9). When we come into relationship with God, his purpose now is for us to seek first the righteousness (mishpat-justice /zedek-righteousness) of his kingdom, with the glorious promise that all our needs will be taken care of (Mt 6:33). So Zacchaeus gives away half his wealth to the poor and Paul is willing to have his whole life poured out as a sacrificial offering to bring God's love to the Gentiles he once feared and despised.

When we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Mt 6:10) we are asking God to establish his justice on earth, through us as his people. Simply from a perspective of biblical integrity and the overall unity of Scripture, it is inconceivable that when Paul promises us that God has "prepared good works" for us to do in advance, they would not include justice on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. This is what Jesus was anointed by the Spirit for (Luke 4:18), and it is the same expression of the Spirit that is manifest in the church in the book of Acts (Acts 2, 4). The atonement and the centrality of the work of Christ on the cross and the resulting gift of the Spirit enable and empower us to "yield our bodies as instruments of righteousness (mishpat-justice, zedek-righteousness) Romans 6:11-14.

When Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:14ff that he has given each of gifts and "talents" (resources) to be invested wisely, and that he will hold us accountable for the use of those resources, he also leaves no doubt what he intends us to use those resources for in the immediately following narrative of Matthew 25:31ff,

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'" Mt 25:34-36

Finally, what is so amazing about God's call for biblical, covenantal justice, is that God intends to work these things in us through a relationship of grace, purchased for us by Christ on the Cross (Romans 5:1, 2). There will be by a constant application of the blood of Christ over our sins and failures (1 John 1:8,9), and there will be an empowering of the Holy Spirit to work in us the very righteous requirements the Law calls for (Romans 8:1-4).

He has shown us, O Church, what is good, and what the Lord requires of us: to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God. And he has gloriously equipped us "with everything good for doing his will" (Hebrews 13:21).

ⁱ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, "Justice"

ⁱⁱ "The Old Testament and the Poor" Harvey Conn, Westminster Media

ⁱⁱⁱ "Parables of Jesus" David Wenham IVP p. 61