

Knowing Justice and Doing Justice: Theological Foundations

I. Justice and creation

- **God's image** gives worth to all human beings.
 - Definition: God's image is the particular structure and the set of capacities of a human being (soul and body) that enable us to know God and to display his likeness in the ways we function in the world, e.g., human relationships, having dominion over the world.
 - Protecting God's image is the reason for punishment of murder (Gen. 9:5-6).
 - God's image must be honored even by refraining from abusive speech (James 3:9).
 - The ultimate image of God is Jesus (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; cf. Heb. 1:3). The inherent, God-given worth of human nature and God's great love for humanity are revealed by God's choice to assume a human nature forever in the person of Jesus.
 - By union with Jesus by the Spirit, God's image and likeness are being renewed (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) in God's people as we are conformed to the image of Christ (1 Cor. 15:49; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2).

Therefore, doing justice is honoring God as Creator by honoring the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, his created image.

- **God's love** gives worth to all human beings.
 - God loves all that he has made (Ps. 145:9, 17).
 - God loves and gives blessings to all, even his enemies (Matt. 5:43-48; cf. Acts 14:17).
 - God loves the world so much that he sent his Son into the world to redeem the world (John 3:16) and became a human being himself.
 - Because God loves all people, his love bestows inherent worth equally upon all people, even if they have lost their unique capacities to live as whole, healthy, fully-functioning persons who express God's image in their actions (e.g., the Velveteen Rabbit; the homes and possessions of famous people that have enormous value not because of their materials or design but because of their relationship to the person).

Therefore, doing justice is loving God by loving the people God loves.

"It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now

meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations.

“It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.”¹

- **God’s ownership** grants rights to the powerless and places obligations upon the powerful to use God’s resources for the sake of justice and righteousness for all.

- God owns the whole creation (Ps. 24:1; 50:10-12; 89:11).
- God is never in any human being’s debt (Job 41:11).
- All human resources are gifts of God (1 Chron. 29:11-14).
- The land belongs to God (Lev. 25:23-24).
- God designates some of the resources of the land for the poor, even if those resources are “owned” (i.e., stewarded) by others (Deut. 24:19).

“Part of the landowner’s harvest was ‘for’ the immigrant and the poor. That means that in God’s eyes, it was actually theirs . . . If the owner did not limit his profits and provide the poor with an opportunity to work for their own benefit in the fields, he did not simply deprive the poor of charity but of justice, of their right. Why? A lack of generosity refuses to acknowledge that your assets are not really yours, but God’s.”²

Therefore, doing justice is submission to God’s rights of ownership as Creator and our status before him as created beings.

- **God’s generosity and power**

God is able to provide all the resources needed to accomplish his purposes for us in serving others, and he promises to do so (2 Cor. 9:9-10; Phil. 4:19; Matt. 6:25-34; 7:7-11; cf. the parable of the talents and taking risks: Matt. 25:14-30).

Therefore, doing justice by extending generous mercy and care to people in need is an expression of faithful trust in God’s power and goodness.

II. Justice and sin

- Sin manifests in individual and corporate ways. Therefore, opposing sin and seeking the fullness of God’s redemption requires addressing personal injustice AND

¹ C. S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” in *The Weight of Glory* (Macmillan, 1980), pp. 18-19.

² Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice* (Dutton, 2010), p. 91.

social/structural/systemic injustice. Tim Keller (*Generous Justice*) describes four types of service that are necessary to respond to the many dimensions of sin and its effects:

- **Evangelism:** Sharing the gospel to lead others to know God personally.
 - **Relief:** Meeting immediate needs for people in crisis who can't help themselves. (Giving a hungry person a fish.)
 - **Development:** Creating pathways out of poverty by helping people to acquire the skills and resources necessary to support themselves. (Teaching a hungry person to fish for themselves and giving them the resources to do so.)
 - **Social Reform:** Moving beyond relief and development to change the social conditions and structures that have an unjust impact by causing or aggravating poverty and dependency. (Working to stop the poisoning of the fish in the water and ensuring that hungry people maintain access to fishing equipment.)
- All humans are guilty and equally in need of God's grace (Rom. 3:9-20, 23). No one is more deserving of God's blessing than anyone else. Therefore, doing justice must come from a sense of solidarity and humility before others, not from a sense of moral superiority.
 - Anger about sin is appropriate, but dangerous.
 - Some anger is righteous. God has righteous wrath against sin. We manifest God's image and likeness when we are grieved and righteously angry about injustice.
 - Even righteous anger is dangerous for sinful people. Therefore, God warns us not to sin in our anger against injustice (Eph. 4:26-27; Ps. 37:1, 7, 8 in context) and to let our anger subside on a daily basis (Eph. 4:26) because it easily leads to evil (Ps. 37:8) and gives the devil an opportunity to attack us (Eph. 4:27).
 - Revenge is God's prerogative as a righteous judge (Rom. 12:17-21; cf. Prov. 20:22; Deut. 32:35-36).

III. Justice and salvation

- Salvation is accomplished by Jesus' justice, not ours.
 - In Jesus, God's justice and righteousness was fully embodied in Jesus' life, and God enacted righteous judgment in faithfulness to his character and his covenant.
 - Jesus is the Righteous One (1 John 2:1) whose death reconciles people to God and to one another (Col. 1:20; 2 Cor. 5:11-21).
 - Through his death, God displayed just judgment against sin so that all who trust him can be justified by receiving and sharing his righteous status (Rom. 3:1-26).
- Salvation is given to us by grace, not by our doing justice.
 - Salvation is not earned or achieved; it is a gift given and received (Eph. 2:1-10). Doing justice is not (and cannot be) a means of earning God's love and salvation. We love and do justice only because God first loved and saved us (1 John 4:10-12; Eph. 2:8-10).
 - Being the recipient of God's love and saving grace should produce humility toward others, because knowledge of grace reveals that we are not measured and accepted by

God on the basis of our achievements or resources. Everyone enters the kingdom by the same humble way: receiving grace with empty hands. Therefore, we have no grounds to treat others in any other way. Therefore, God continually appeals to his saving grace as a motive for his people to do justice. Israel was to do justice to poor and powerless because they had been rescued by God from a condition of poverty and slavery (Deut. 10:18-19; 24:17-18).

- Every aspect of salvation clarifies that our most fundamental identity and worth is God's love and his work for us and in us, not the cultural markers of human achievement and pride.

- Justification: We are forgiven and declared righteous in Christ, not as a reward for our good deeds.
- Adoption: We are God's sons and daughters and heirs of God's inheritance in Christ, and that matters far more than the human family to which we belong.
- Sanctification: We are transformed from glory to glory by grace, not by accumulating education, wealth, accomplishments, or the world's recognition.
- Resurrection: We have life (in soul and body) by grace, not by our policies and practices.

Think what this means for an oppressed person who lacks the blessings and resources that others have!

- Relationship with God the Father through union with Christ by the Holy Spirit is the only source of love and life that sustains doing justice. Doing justice is participation in God's work in Christ.

"Justice that perseveres is justice that is intimately connected to our life in Christ. Life that is rooted in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, who draws us into the story of Scripture and connects us to the ongoing life of the church, sees the present and future mission of God's kingdom as integrally connected with this Jesus-rooted justice. Jesus commands us to love and to seek justice— not as frantic and reactive producers of justice but rather as bearers of the fruit he is producing. Jesus invites us to abide in him as branches of a vine; in so doing, we allow his fruit to be born through us, not because of us.

"Jesus's call to abide in him is the cornerstone of understanding his call to seek justice for those who suffer oppression and violent abuse. The act of abiding is not passive. It does not mean inactivity or disregard for the needs around us. It simply means that we respond to every need and every moment from a place of deep trust in Jesus Christ and an understanding that our identity lies in him, not in our ability to seek and bear justice. The work of justice is guaranteed to bring about discouragement, sleeplessness, intense questioning, physical danger, roadblocks, and spiritual attack. While our unprecedented access to stories of injustice and violence in our world today can spark passion, indignation, and a desire to act, it is nearly impossible to sustain an impulsive and emotionally driven response over the long haul. Reactive, emotion-driven action suffers from a lack of healthy roots from which to draw nourishment."³

³ Bethany Hoang and Kristen Johnson, *The Justice Calling: Where Passion Meets Perseverance* (Baker, 2016), p. 191.