

Knowing Justice and Doing Justice: Justice in the New Testament

I. Preparing the Way for the Coming of God's Justice in Jesus

- John the Baptist: Prophet of justice
Like the other prophets in Israel's history, John calls for repentance and faith expressed themselves in justice and righteousness in social relationships (Luke 3:10-14).
- The songs Mary foretells the coming of God's justice in Jesus (Luke 1:52-53).
- The announcement of Jesus' birth came first to shepherds, people who were relatively poor and low on the scale of social standing (Luke 2:8-18).

II. Jesus and Justice in the Gospels: God's Justice Incarnate

- Jesus came to fulfill, not abolish the Old Testament, and this fulfillment in the kingdom of God entails righteous living by God's people (Matt. 5:17-20). Specifically, he fulfills OT prophecies of the Messiah/King who establishes God's kingdom, which brings justice and righteousness for all peoples.
 - Luke 4:16-21 (quoting Isa. 61:1-2, part of a larger passage about God's justice and righteousness: 61:3, 8).
 - Matthew 11:2-6/Luke 7:18-23
 - Jesus' healing is a demonstration that he is the promised Messiah/King bringing a kingdom of God's justice (Matt. 12:15-21/Isa. 42:1-9).
- Jesus' reign brings justice in word and deed, to soul and body, to individuals and communities.
 - Jesus heals multitudes (Matt. 4:23-25; Mark 1:29-34/Luke 4:38-40).
 - By healing lepers, Jesus restores both health to the body and the person to the worship of God and social life in the community (Luke 5:12-15).
- Jesus' teaching and example shows special concern for the powerless and vulnerable.
 - Jesus teaches his followers to hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) in a setting that emphasizes concern for the poor, the hungry, the mourning, and the persecuted (Matt. 5:2-11/Luke 6:20-22).
 - In his healing ministry, Jesus chose to spend a great deal of time with poor and sick people (e.g., Matt. 4:23-25; Mark 1:29-34/Luke 4:38-40).
 - Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37): Note how extensively the Samaritan serves the wounded man! And by making the wounded man a Jew in the story, Jesus invited his listeners to imagine themselves from the standpoint of the victim, not the helper.
 - The parable of the banquet (Luke 14:12-24): Jesus' special concern for the poor and powerless is to be the way of life for all people in his kingdom.
 - Final judgment (Matt. 25:31-46): Some of the clearest evidence of saving faith that Jesus will use as criteria for the last judgment is care for the poor and powerless.

- Jesus crosses many boundaries and barriers of ethnicity and social class to unite many different kinds of people in the community of his disciples.
 - tax collectors, e.g., Matthew (Matt. 9:9-10), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10)
 - Roman soldiers (Matt. 5:5-13/Luke 7:1-10)
 - zealots, e.g., Simon, one of the 12 (Matt. 10:4)
 - Gentiles: Samaritans (John 4:1-42); Greeks (John 12:20); Phoenicians (Matt. 15:21-28)
 - wealthy & educated, e.g., Nicodemus (John 3:1-14; 19:39); Joseph of Arimathea
 - “middle class” business people, e.g., Peter, James, and John (Matt. 4:18, 21-22)
 - prostitutes (Luke 7:36-50)
 - widows, e.g., Anna (Luke 2:36-38), Luke 7:11-15
 - poor and socially outcast: lame, blind, paralyzed (Matt. 15:30-31; 21:14), lepers (Matt. 8:1-4/Luke 5:12-14; Mark 14:3; Luke 17:11-19)
- Jesus teaches his followers that seeking his kingdom means seeking righteousness as one’s highest priority (Matt. 6:33).
- Jesus empowered his disciples not only to preach/teach but also to heal the body as he did (Matt. 10:1, 8/Luke 9:1-2).
- Jesus’ critique of the Pharisees and scribes was that they oppressed the vulnerable and neglected justice (Matt. 23:23; Luke 20:47)
- 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 became the victim of violent injustice from both Jewish and Roman systems.
 - 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).

III. Jesus and Justice in the Early Church

- The apostles taught that believers should pursue righteousness (Rom. 6:13; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22).
 - 1 Timothy 3:16: Scripture is given for training in righteousness.
 - Romans 8:1-11: The work of Christ and the Holy Spirit produces righteousness in believers.
 - Romans 14:17: The kingdom of God is about righteousness, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit.

- The early church established communities of justice that provided for the social and material needs of church members.
 - Acts 2:42-47: Everyone received according to their needs.
 - Acts 4:34-37: In the early Jerusalem church, people with wealth freely gave to the needy so that there were no needy persons among them (cf. Deut. 15:4).
 - Acts 6:1-7: When widows were neglected because of language barriers, the church expanded and diversified its leadership to provide for their needs.
 - 2 Corinthians 8-9/Romans 15:25-27: Paul spent great energy to collect funds for the poor and hungry in Jerusalem. (Note 2 Cor. 9:9: giving freely to the poor is the expression of God's righteousness.)
 - James 1:16-17: Pure religion is to care for orphans and widows.
- The early church was to be a family that unified people by a common faith in Christ across all boundaries of race, ethnicity, language, and social class.
 - Galatians 3:28: In Christ, different people are united.
 - 1 Timothy 5: The church is God's household (3:15) in which all consider one another family members and cooperate to care for widows and the needy among them.
 - James 2:1-13: Fulfilling the "royal law" of Jesus' kingdom means showing no partiality to people based on wealth or social standing.
 - 1 John 3:16-18: Loving God in response to his saving love for us in Christ requires loving our neighbors in deeds of generous giving to meet their needs.
 - 1 Corinthians 11: Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for letting Greco-Roman social class divisions corrupt their celebration of the Lord's Supper.

IV. Jesus and Justice in the Renewal of All Things

According to Revelation 21-22, when God removes the effects of sin and resurrects and glorifies the creation, God's justice will prevail in the whole creation.

- 21:3-4: God will remove all mourning, pain, and death from the human community.
- 21:10: The glorified creation is described as a city (a social/political community). Not just a family or club or even temple (although the whole city & creation is a temple).
- 22:1, 3: The glorified creation-city is a kingdom with the throne of God and Jesus, the Lamb.
- 21:26: Kings will bring the glory and honor of the nations (i.e., social/political communities) into the glorified creation (fulfilling Isaiah 60). Thus, the glorified creation will be a unified, reconciled kingdom-community of diverse peoples and cultures (cf. Rev. 5:9-10) in which human relationships are made right.
- 22:5: The saints not only worship but they reign in the new creation, i.e., participate and share in God's reign/rule. (Cf. 2:25-27; 3:21 → 20:4: martyrs & faithful rule; 1:6; 5:10: saints reign on earth).

This a picture of perfect justice and righteousness: All the relationships within God's creation are functioning according to God's design, and the result is harmony and the flourishing of all humanity and all creation.