



Justice

Elder Position Paper

Few subjects are as popular today in both larger culture and the Church as is *justice*. A particular brand of justice – *social justice* – has become the most prominent, and has muddied the waters of what true justice is. God is the source of all justice because justice is one of His perfections (attributes): “The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is He” (Deut 32:4).¹ The Hebrew and Greek terms translated “justice” in English Bibles are variously translated also as “righteousness,” which is why systematic theologians often treat *justice* and *righteousness* together. As it pertains to God, we could say that *justice is God’s perfect righteousness in all His actions according to His character and nature*. We see this in the way that He punishes sin. Indeed, because He is just (righteous) He cannot ignore sin by simply overlooking it and allow sinners to be pardoned. Rather, He must punish all sin because to not do so would be unjust and a violation of His perfect character. In revealing Himself to Moses, we are told, “The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but *Who will by no means clear the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation’” (Exo 3:6-7).

If because of His perfect justice God will not clear the guilty, how can He also be forgiving toward sinners who deserve eternal condemnation? As Romans 6:23a says, “For the wages of sin is death....” The answer is also found in God, particularly through the second Person of the Godhead, Jesus Christ: “... but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:23b)! *God can forgive hell-deserving sinners because He visited perfect justice for their sins on His sinless Son at the cross* (1 Pet 2:24). The sins of all His elect people have received their just sentence at Calvary, and thus it is a matter of justice (righteousness) for God to forgive the sins of His people when they confess them through Christ (1 Jn 1:9). Those who do not turn to Christ in repentant faith, however, will receive the just punishment for their sins in hell forever (Matt 25:46).

¹ All biblical quotations are from the Holy Bible: English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

Justice between people must have reference to justice as it is in God Himself, as we have just seen. In fact, righteousness means to live justly before others: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic 6:8)? To live a just life is to live a righteous life, which means a life that conforms to the standards of God's Law as held out in the commands of Scripture. To live justly means to treat every person equally as a precious image-bearer of God. This means, for example, that favoritism is forbidden (Jas 2:1-13). It means giving to every person what is owed to them, all of which culminates in neighbor love (Rom 12:8-10). It means being generous to the needy and speaking up for those whose rights are trampled because they cannot advocate for themselves (Pss 41:1, 112:5, 9; Prov 29:7, 31:8-9). Because personal justice and righteousness are pleasing to God, and no one can please God apart from faith in Christ, a life of true justice from the heart can therefore only exist in those who are united to Christ in the Gospel (Isa 64:6; Jn 15:4-5; Heb 11:6). Justice is a Gospel issue, which is why false ideas of social justice are such a threat to the Church (including Critical Theory, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, so-called White Fragility, and Antiracism).²

God intends for justice to be done not just between individuals, but in society – that is, not just personal justice, but civic justice. God ordained government as an institution to protect and ensure justice in society, promoting and protecting good while simultaneously punishing and restraining evil (Rom 13:1-7). At the heart of civic justice is the righteous standard of equal treatment of all people under the law, as seen in the principle of *lex talionis*, or the law of retribution ("eye for eye, tooth for tooth;" Exo 21:22-24; Lev 24:19-20; Deut 19:16-21).³ This kind of societal justice treats every person fairly under the law, not giving favor or privileges to one group over another. It is a far cry, however, from contemporary notions of *social justice* that are more accurately understood as "distributive justice" that focuses not on equal *treatment*, but equal *outcome* (often manifest in unjustly taking what belongs to some and redistributing it to others in order to "level the playing field"). Such ideas of so-called "justice" do not please God. We must strive for personal and civic justice that is understood in relation to Who God is and under the authority of His Word, not the inventions and whims of man.⁴

² For a helpful and brief exploration of these subjects, see Neil Shenvi's introductions at <https://shenviapologetics.com/intro-to-critical-theory/>. Another helpful resource would be the "Thought Line" at the beginning of Voddie Baucham's book, *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021).

³ Jesus's teaching about retaliation in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:38-42) does not contradict the divine principle of *lex talionis* in civic law, but rather was a correction of how this civic principle had become personalized by the scribes and Pharisees to sanction personal retaliation.

⁴ Helpful resources in the preparation of this position paper include: William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); Logos Bible Software; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995); Timothy Keller, "Justice in the Bible" sections 1 & 2, Gospel in Life, Q3:2020, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/justice-in-the-bible/> (accessed 5 February 2021), and Phil Johnson, "Justice," November 30, 2018, <https://statementonsocialjustice.com/articles/article-3-justice-explanation-by-phil-johnson/> (accessed 9 August 2021).