



Social Justice vs. Righteous Justice

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Marvin Olasky challenges accepted views of “social justice” and turns to the Scripture for counsel on how to begin thinking about this crucial term. Dr. Olasky is Editor-in-Chief of World magazine, Provost of The King’s College, New York City, and a Fellow of The Wilberforce Forum.

A challenge to conventional wisdom

We all know, or think we know, what “social justice” is, so I’ll jump right in with a **challenge** to that conventional wisdom. Here’s my thesis: Biblically, the most important purpose of justice is to increase righteousness. Whatever decreases faith in God is unjust. Much of what passes as “social justice” today is unjust. We can do much better if we think biblically.

I’ll start by examining the meaning of those **two words**, social justice, since they are now thrown about like rice at the end of a wedding. Recent *New York Times* articles have associated “social justice” with liberal positions on sexual orientation, housing provision, racial equality, provision of jobs, environmental concerns, pacifist movements, health care, global food needs, and the eating of food grown within 50 miles of the eater.

The individual the *Times* connects to “social justice” most often these days is, unsurprisingly, Barack Obama – but journalists have linked others as well. A movie about a pirate who purportedly robbed from the rich “strikes a nerve of social justice at the moment.” A kosher label signifies that food was processed in a “socially just and sustainable” way. A recently deceased man involved with public housing and urban renewal had a “great concern for social justice.” A recently deceased mother “inspired her children with a strong sense of social justice, environmentalism, and a love of nature.”

Point of view

Much of the ambiguity comes from combining two words often used imprecisely. Let’s start

with the second, “justice.” The common understanding of the word is “getting what is fair” – but the closer we look, the more we see that the meaning of justice depends largely on our **vantage points** and **presuppositions**.

For example, in **Hinduism**, since our essence continues from one incarnation to the next, what is fair depends on how we lived in our previous life. In secular egalitarianism, since we are materialist consumers, justice means each person having an equal share. In our courtrooms, justice is supposed to be a proportionate response to crime.

Some adjectives stuck in front of “justice” may provide clarity, at least in American culture. **Contractual justice** is fulfilling what one in writing has agreed to do. **Commutative justice** is keeping one’s side of a bargain even if the agreement is not signed and sealed. **Legal justice** (equal treatment of all under the law, with unbribed judges and juries), and **criminal justice** (preservation of law and order) also have clear meanings, even though their practical application may be controversial

When we move to other adjectives, though, clarity decreases. **Distributive justice** connotes that each person gets what his work or investment warrants, but computing that often brings controversy. **Social justice** theoretically could be the sum of all those different kinds of justice, but it is often a euphemism for governmental redistribution of funds from rich to poor. Under such a dispensation a vote to raise taxes on those with above-average income is a vote for social justice. Some see an emphasis on charity, because it’s voluntary, as an attack on social justice, since transfers from rich to poor should be obligatory.

The British Journal of Sociology called one book, Brian Barry’s *Why Social Justice Matters* (2005), “a powerful argument against the utter inequity of the current political and economic system.” Britain’s *The Guardian* eschewed the euphemism “equity” and labeled the book “a brilliant polemic against inequality.” That reflects the **common academic usage**, where social justice has come to mean not only equality before the law (“equity”) but equality of result, which—given the highly differentiated callings, talent, and discipline of humans—can only be brought about by governmental coercion.

To add another layer of complexity, it appears that education for social justice is now very big in public schools. Amazon.com features at least three books on teaching social justice in math classes, which means spending less time learning the multiplication table and more time learning about the uneven distribution of wealth in the U.S. It strikes me that one of the greatest injustices is leaving kids without enough math knowledge to get a decent job and begin redistributing some money to themselves – but I digress.

The Bible on justice

Faced with this confusion, **let’s go to the Bible**, where the Hebrew word *mishpat*, justice, appears about 145 times. (Words translated as “justice” are much less frequent in the New Testament, appearing only 12 times.)

Mishpat includes **contractual** and **commutative** justice. Messing with weights and measures is obvious sin: Proverbs 20:23 states that “Unequal weights are an abomination to the Lord,” and God in Micah 6:11 asks, “Shall I acquit the man with wicked scales and with a bag of

deceitful weights?” Not paying laborers is also abominable: Jeremiah 22:13 pledges misery to anyone “who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages.”

Legal justice, typified by an unwillingness to be bribed, is also important. Deuteronomy 16:19 declares, “You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Other injunctions include that of 2 Chronicles 19:7, “Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the Lord our God, or partiality or taking bribes,” and Proverbs 17:23, “The wicked accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the ways of justice.”

Judicial disinterestedness also includes an unwillingness to gain preferment by developing a reputation for siding with either rich or poor. Examples: Exodus 23:2, “You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit, siding with the many, so as to pervert justice,” and Leviticus 19:15, “You shall do no injustice in court. You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.”

Another **common biblical use of justice** is not far from our conventional emphasis on law and order. Isaiah 61:8 has God saying, “I the Lord love justice; I hate robbery and wrong.” Injustice includes taking advantage of those who may not have the same legal rights as others, as in Ezekiel 22:29’s reference to those who “have extorted from the sojourner without justice.” The natural inclination of the rich is to ask “Who cares?” regarding a poor and powerless person, but God cares: Deuteronomy 24:13 states, “You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the Lord your God.”

Such passages lead us to the **biblical version of distributive justice**: Helping those in trouble because of God’s mysterious providence. Examples include Deuteronomy 10:18, “justice for the fatherless and the widow”; Psalm 10:18, “do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed”; Isaiah 1:17, “bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause; and Jeremiah 22:3, “do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed.”

Clearly, God does care about the spiritually and physically needy. Psalm 140:12 notes that “God will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and will execute justice for the needy.” Proverbs 29:7 stipulates that “a righteous man knows the rights of the poor.”

But the Bible is about much more than gaps between powerful and powerless, rich and poor. The Bible emphasizes the gap between God and ourselves, and how Christ can fill the holes in our own souls – and that leads us to an understanding of justice more profound than that emanating from normal orations about social justice.

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