

HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE social justice? We hear about it often in the media, but do we really know what it means? What is the biblical view of justice? Here is a hint—it is very different from what the world calls “social justice” these days.

One of the Hebrew words for justice is *tzedek* (צֶדֶק). It can also mean righteousness. Let’s explore the concept more deeply. Justice occurs 129 times in the Bible, 54 of which are in the prophets. *Tzedek* is derived from the word *zakah*, meaning clear or pure. From that root, it comes to mean right or just. Two closely related words are *tzedakah* (charity) and *tzadik* (a righteous person).

Justice Brings Life

Are you starting to get a composite picture of all that this significant biblical word means? From God’s perspective, justice is critically important—a life or death matter according to His *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.). Deuteronomy 16:20 says: “**Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you**” (NASB, emphasis added). The implication is that the pursuit of justice (righteousness) brings life, individually and for a society. The opposite is equally true.

Biblically, justice indicates righteousness, judgment and abiding by the law. Most societies have guidelines for achieving equity and obedience to the legal system. Yet from a biblical/Jewish perspective, there are deeper and more profound connections. One of the most important is how the concept of justice relates to covenant. When God made His eternal covenant with the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, it included obligations to both God and other people. As God’s people, He expected them to show His character through the just society they would build. The *Torah* called for justice. They were to establish fair courts, take care of the vulnerable, including widows, orphans and strangers, lend without interest and pay laborers fairly. Deuteronomy 24:17 is a clear example: “*You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow’s garment as a pledge.*” Wise king Solomon added: “*To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice*” (Prov. 21:3).

“Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.” Deuteronomy 16:20



The Israelites were supposed to observe the rules of the covenant. When they did not, they profaned God’s name. Whenever Israel and Judah failed to exemplify this substantive type of justice, God sent prophets to remind them and call them to repentance.

Justice According to the Prophets

Justice, or more accurately, the lack thereof, was a central theme of the prophets. The failure to uphold the laws of the covenant concerning the poor and the vulnerable was often at the core of the prophets’ critiques. Consider Amos, for example. He chastised the people of his day for turning away from justice and righteousness. In Amos 5:12, he said: *“For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: Afflicting the just and taking bribes; diverting the poor from justice at the gate.”* In biblical times, the city gate served as the court for legal proceedings.

The prophet Amos’s name means burden or burden bearer. God gave him a burden for the oppressed within society. The book of Amos contains some of the strongest



“Hate

calls for justice in the entire Bible, and indeed, in all of world history. It is a scathing rebuke to the selfish, rich, ruling class of his day. He pointed out how the rich were covering up with false piety the injustices rampant in their society. In Amos 5:15, he admonished: *“Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.”* And in verse 24, he said: *“But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.”*

Many scholars believe that Amos was the first of the “writing” prophets. He began his ministry around 767 BC. The biblical prophets ministered over a period of about 340 years. They spoke to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Malachi was the final recorded prophet around 425 BC. During most of this time, a series of mostly wicked kings ruled in both the north and the south. Most led the people away from walking in God’s covenantal ways.

evil, love good; establish justice in the gate.” Amos 5:15

Isaiah, a contemporary of Amos, prophesied during the reigns of four kings of Judah. In his opening chapter, Isaiah admonished, “*Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow*” (Isa. 1:17, emphasis added). Justice was a common theme for Isaiah. In fact, he mentions it 28 more times in the remainder of his book. Most of the prophetic books in the Bible contain clear calls for increased justice. God led the prophets to share His heart for restoring the world.

Justice Brings Wholeness

While God alone can transform hearts, I believe that He expects us to join Him in this great restoration project. Wholeness is restored when both individual and community transformation are combined. We need to experience God’s wholeness ourselves and bring it to bear in the world around us. When our lives are in union with God and His heart, our influence will naturally extend outward to help others. Our call is to be God-like (righteous) individually and to join Him in the work of making everything right, as He originally intended. In Judaism, this concept is known as *tikkun olam*, repairing or improving the world. As Christians, we believe that this process will only be completed at the time that Paul told us about in 1 Corinthians 15:24: “*Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.*”

We are learning that biblical justice is rooted in community. And we understand our responsibility to be involved. But how do we actually do it? How do we actually love our neighbors as ourselves? By fostering a more continual focus on “the other.” It is natural to be concerned about one’s own needs and how to

care for one's own family. But are we giving adequate attention to the needs of others in our congregations, social networks and communities?

There has been a rising concern for justice in large parts of the Church during the 21st century. This is dramatically evident among the younger generations. I see this as a positive sign. The Scripture makes it very clear that we as believers will be known by our fruits. Many young people today emphasize getting involved in social causes as part of their Christian witness. The Church needs to disciple these believers so that their zeal is firmly rooted in biblical principles and can be expressed in ways that honor God. When you get involved practically with social causes, bringing wholeness to your part of the world, take a younger person with you. Show them that your efforts stem from your personal passion to love God and to love your neighbor. Or if you need motivation, join *them*—many of them are already getting involved.



“...to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8

Be sure to go into this holy calling with your eyes wide open. Jesus (Yeshua) said that if we are His, we are not of the world and its values. He warned us in John 15:19–20: *“If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.”*

When we live and act in accord with God’s values, we can expect the world to push back. God’s values clash with the world’s values and systems. We are seldom called upon to choose between good and evil. Usually, the choice is between doing what is good or doing what is comfortable. Don’t miss opportunities that come along throughout life to take a stand for true justice in society from God’s perspective in Scripture. And, of course, our involvement in efforts to help others and bring positive change must always be done in ways that are nonviolent and honor the One we represent as His ambassadors.

Justice in Summary

When it comes to a biblical understanding of justice, the message is clear: we need to know what it is from God’s perspective, and we must join Him in ensuring that it happens. One of my favorite verses in all of Scripture is Micah 6:8: *“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?”* (ESV).

In Matthew 23:23, Jesus (Yeshua) says that justice is one of three weighty matters of the Law (along with mercy and faith) that, as His followers, we should not neglect. Later in Matthew 25:31–46, He focuses our attention on those who are hungry, thirsty, naked and in prison. Then, the apostle James, in his very practical letter, tells us, *“Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world”* (1:27). And in James 2:1–13, he speaks unequivocally against oppressing the poor and showing favoritism to the rich.

Jesus is our example. He was constantly involved with those who were less fortunate. And He regularly challenged the unjust systems in society. Make a renewed effort to bring wholeness to your own life and ask God to help you find an opportunity this week to work toward restoration in the world around you. Choose the good way rather than the comfortable way. God wants His people to partner with Him to bring wholeness to the world. Will you join Him?

Bibliography

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Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

TERMINOLOGY:

Many of our readers are seasoned supporters of Israel while others are just beginning to understand the importance of standing with God's chosen nation; some prefer the use of Hebrew names and terms, while others are comfortable with more traditional Christian terminology. Because we want to show respect to all of our readers while providing an enjoyable educational experience, we are making every effort to use both terms whenever possible. The following are some of the most common examples:

- Jesus (Yeshua)
- *Tanakh* (Old Testament or OT) – *Tanakh* is an acronym used in Judaism which stands for *Torah*, *Neviim* or Prophets and *Ketuvim* or Writings.
- Writings of the Apostles (New Testament or NT)
- *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.)

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