



Foundational Essay


DO JUSTICE

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INTRODUCTION

[The Lord] has told you, O mortal, 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?

—Micah 6:8



Scripture is filled with the persistent push and pull between righteousness as God sets it forth and as humanity fails to follow it.



Humans seem to be born with a fledgling sense of fairness based on self-preservation and selfishness. Before toddlers can even speak, they will scream foul when a toy is taken by another child. Following the rules of a game is an obsession for many children at a certain age, especially when someone cheats. The caregiver is often forced to be judge and do justice, teaching both children about right and wrong. Fortunately, figuring out how to right the wrong is not always too complicated in our early years. Through social conditioning we develop a moral compass that guides our sense of justice.

This internal compass of right and wrong is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. Scripture is filled with the persistent push and pull between righteousness as God sets it forth and as humanity fails to follow it. Christianity is based in the story of the Jewish people, rooted in the ancestral and epigenetic memory of those who have been deeply wronged. In the lives of the midwives of Egypt who delivered Jewish babies, even when their own lives were endangered for doing so, they sought to push back against sin with righteousness. Christianity has its roots in the stories of an enslaved people, newly freed and following Moses into the wilderness because they knew what every enslaved generation has known throughout time: to be free is worth everything. Justice and liberation go hand in hand.

Liberating justice appears again and again as the core of the Christian story, in ways that are bold and ways that are subtle, always returning to the need to bridge the gap between the world as it is and the world toward which God calls us. The stories and traditions that comprise Christianity find meaning in acknowledging the world as a deeply unfair place, and ourselves as participants in righteousness or unrighteousness, depending on our willingness to answer God's calling. Our savior was the recipient of

state-sponsored execution without justice. And he was also the embodiment of the good news that tells us that a just world is possible.

The call to do justice in Micah 6:8 is echoed throughout the Bible. We are called to do and be lots of other things as well, but at the core of the Christian tradition is a sense of creating a more just world. This transformation must be more than rhetoric. To fulfill the command to do justice we must take right and wrong out of the realm of abstraction and recognize it as a very earthly, very pragmatic necessity in the Christian life. Biblical justice is rooted in the ancient Hebrew concept of *mishpat*, which is, itself, rooted in the idea of judgment. Modern Hebrew translates *mishpat* as “law” and, indeed, biblical *mishpat* referred to basic civil law. However, *mishpat* was more than just a list of rules. *Mishpat* was a foundational value in Judaism and referred to a just ordered society, one in which equity and fairness rule. It encapsulates understanding good, evil, and the consequences of each. *Mishpat* is the compass by which we navigate right and wrong in the world, seeking fairness and equity in both interpersonal forms of injustice, and expansive systemic and generational harms caused by unjust actions.


The biblical command to “do justice” in Micah 6:8 (see also Hosea 12:6; Proverbs 21:15; Amos 5:24; Isaiah 30:18–19; and throughout Scripture) reminds us that righteousness in the world is never completed but always in progress and incumbent on us to pursue, create, and establish. It requires that we *see injustice* in our midst and in our own behaviors. It necessitates that we *check our prejudice* to understand victims of injustice. It requires that we *speak up*: to power, to our own communities, and to ourselves. And it demands that we actually *do the work*, changing systems and practices that prop up injustice. Through these four aspects, the pursuit of justice demands we keep moving forward as we embrace this work as a lifelong facet of our identity as Christians.

Justice is not something we can achieve on our own or all at once. It is never accomplished in totality but is the goal toward which we continually reach. The vision of a truly just existence for all rests only in the conclusion that is God’s perfect *kingdom*, yet we are not absolved from working for righteousness here in the meantime. In truth, that is how Scripture calls us to live our whole lives, persevering in the name of righteousness.


Justice is in perpetual motion with the ebbs and flows and lived realities of a billion lives in concert or discord with one another. It moves, sometimes in a long arc, sometimes in the spark of a moment, abrupt and necessary, but never linear and never final. It is the movement of the Holy Spirit among the people and the striving for equity that we see made manifest in the life of Jesus Christ. In his anti-hierarchical and subversive movement, he elevates the lowly, amplifies the voices of the marginalized, and values right relationship over legalism. Jesus is our key model for how we can embody and fulfill the command to do justice. Let us now explore more deeply the four aspects of *see injustice*, *check your prejudice*, *speak up*, and *do the work*.

RECOGNIZE INJUSTICE

In John 7:53–8:11, we are given a clear example of seeing injustice, and recognizing it for what it is. Jesus is drawn into a public pseudo-trial by the Pharisees, the community’s religious leaders. A woman, accused of adultery, is hauled unceremoniously before him. The Pharisees are using her as a prop to force Jesus into saying what he really thinks, whether he will operate



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“Kin-dom of God” is a term coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, a *mujerista* (womanist) theologian. It rejects the presumption that God is male and the hierarchical connotations of the concept of *kingdom* in today’s power systems. It envisions a day when we will all be siblings to one another. The term is increasingly being used by Christians.¹

1. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha / In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), xi, n.1.

in line with their sense of *mishpat*, right and wrong. It is clear that the Pharisees believe this woman should be put to death for her actions.

Jesus sees this woman, pauses, and offers a new way for her to be seen before those who accuse her. The Scripture does not leave room for ambiguity. She has committed adultery; she has committed sin. The Pharisees force her to stand in the public square, presenting her for judgment as a test for Jesus, regardless of the humiliation this is causing her. They are pushing for his sense of justice to align with theirs, for him to echo their judgments. Instead, Jesus pivots the narrative away from a legalistic one to a deeper level of justice, which includes revealing the truth about who we are and how we live.

He sees her, and he sees the Pharisees as well, and he sees the system in which they are operating. He recognizes that none of us is without sin, and yet this woman is poised to be the victim of a system that determines the value of some lives over others and enacts misogyny as a matter of course. Rather than flinging invectives at these religious leaders for their own hypocrisy, Jesus invites them to see their humanity and, in doing so, sheds light on the humanity of the whole community. “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7b). The cognitive dissonance of being willing to execute a woman for one sin while guilty of a multitude of sins themselves proves too much to bear, even for the Pharisees. One by one, they drop their stones and walk away. The journey toward justice begins, then, with the acknowledgment of what we see and what—and who—is rendered invisible.

This work of creating visibility offers an opportunity to distinguish between charity and justice, between what is easy and what is necessary. Being vigilant for justice gives us a profound opportunity to widen our gaze. Providing snacks for hungry children is an important ministry, but at the same time we must ask ourselves why some children in our community are hungry in the first place, when others daily toss leftovers in the trash. While we celebrate our church’s mission work of building houses for unhoused neighbors, we must ask why some own houses while so many are homeless, living in shelters amidst abandoned buildings. Discovering the answers to those questions will undoubtedly make some uncomfortable. Doing justice is making the choice to lean into that discomfort and strive for a better world, refusing to tune out the uncomfortable parts of reality and our own complicity in unjust systems.

By engaging in processes of asking hard questions and learning from the answers, we can confront the ways we have internalized the mechanisms and realities of systemic oppression in our everyday patterns. If we want to do justice, we have to want to see, learn, and understand. Rendering the invisible seen involves the kind of radical empathy with which Christ engages everyone he encounters, regarding each person in the fullness of their humanity—flawed, finite, and forgiven—as an act of hope in the possibility of who they might become.

CHECK YOUR PREJUDICE

In James 2:1–7, we are reminded that to be Christian is to radically humanize everyone we encounter. It is a reminder to empathize.

My brothers and sisters, do not claim the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory while showing partiality. For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty



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clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Have a seat here in a good place, please,” while to the one who is poor you say, “Stand there,” or, “Sit by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor person. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into the courts? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

James is asking us to consider what it means to genuinely encounter our siblings in the world, that both the poor and rich are siblings to Christ and, therefore, to us. Judgment comes from a place of abstraction and arms-length interactions. But relationship—humanization of each other through empathy—is the path to justice.


While it is easy to name the things that harm us personally, we all are deficient in recognizing our participation in systems that harm others. Systemic harm caused by racism may be unperceivable to white people, as sexism may remain unnoticed by men, or homophobia may remain insensible to heterosexuals. Yet justice requires we see the systems from which we benefit as much as the ones that cause us harm. This recognition does not happen on its own. It involves the development of skills of deep listening and asking hard questions. Who benefits from the structures embodying white supremacy? How do we opt for ease over righteousness in our purchasing choices? Do we minimize our own contributions to the climate crisis and wait for larger powers to implement change while continuing our contaminating habits? Have communities stopped at acknowledging that they exist on Indigenous peoples’ land, and failed to make steps toward repairing that injustice? Do we drop everything for the latest public protest but disregard the micro-aggressions in our own relationships? When we ask such questions, we are drawing closer to the wisdom of God, embodied by Christ. Wisdom is a divine wellspring that guides truth from our hearts to our lips, guiding us toward an empathetic understanding of the world. Recognizing injustice around us with an empathetic posture in the world allows us to tap into this eternal flow of wisdom so that we might add our voices to the chorus of justice makers throughout human history.

SPEAK UP

In John 2:13–16, Jesus embodies the power of speaking up in response to injustice. Jesus sees the beloved temple, a sacred place for relationship with and worship of God, turned into a place of commerce, overrun with merchants cashing in on the spiritually needy. People are being met with stall after stall of merchants, calling out to would-be customers and using God’s temple for profit. Bearing witness to this, Jesus becomes angry, and he does something about it. He turns prophecy and protest into a one-man riot. He moves with passion and commitment, causing a physical disruption alongside a verbal one. He clearly identifies where the air is thick with injustice and makes it clear that it will not stand. Economic injustice, harm caused by institutions of faith more interested in their coffers than God’s people, and practices that cheapen grace must be upended. “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” His words




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take on the prophetic risk that will eventually lead to the cross, speaking difficult truths to those in power.

Those who follow Jesus are called to go and do likewise. In biblical justice, speaking out is not just shouting into the sky; rather, it is a careful and purposeful attempt to name the unspeakable parts of society that keep power structures in place. The prophet Isaiah instructs: “Shout out, do not hold back! / Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” He proceeds (Isaiah 58:1–9) to invoke the call of justice to God’s people, to move beyond acting out the rituals of faith and into noticing and disrupting the ways they are self-serving, oppressive, and quick to harm one another. Isaiah reminds us that the call to notice and speak out against injustice is required for creating a world in line with God’s vision for all God’s children. With this, Isaiah bears the promise; when God’s people act with justice for those who are hungry, homeless, naked, and vulnerable, then we shall receive life in the fullness the Lord wants for us. Then, when we call out in our own need, God will answer, “Here I am.”



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The function of speaking out about injustice when we see it takes myriad forms in the twenty-first century. It looks like op-eds, and it looks like protest chants, social media, and town-hall gatherings where people show up and speak up about injustice in their communities and done in their names. It looks like white people recognizing that racism is a problem they need to solve, and it looks like men showing up and believing women when they explain the ubiquity of rape culture. It looks like naming the homophobia in the room rather than avoiding eye contact, upsetting the family norms or workplace status quo that allow hurtful comments to go unchallenged. The act of speaking out has necessarily adapted with the times, and yet we can and must be formed and reformed by Christ’s model, which is a culture of calling in—calling people toward justice—while calling out and naming injustice. Jesus spoke of justice by drawing people close, recognizing their lived realities, and then naming a vision of a more just world that he invited them to co-create.

To live as a Christian is to work to do the same. Being silenced by fear of being unpopular, by losing church members, by becoming a target in communities of intolerance, is not in line with the call of Christ. Christ disturbs existing power structures, elucidating all the harm they cause and saying, unequivocally, no, even unto his own death.

DO THE WORK

The prophet Isaiah reminds us in chapter 58 that justice cannot be confined to words and feelings. It is a matter of action. Here, in verse 1, the prophet encourages us to speak up: “Shout out; do not hold back! / Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” The prophet makes it immediately clear that there is indeed something disruptive and strange to shout about in the commands God gives God’s people. If we want to know who God is, the prophet tells us, and if we want to be clear about how God receives our worship and praise, we should look no further than the justice to which God calls us. “Isn’t it obvious?” Isaiah seems to say. “Is not this the fast that I choose: / to loose the bonds of injustice, / to undo the straps of the yoke, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to break every yoke? / Is it not to share your bread with the hungry / and bring the homeless poor into your house; / when you see the naked, to cover them / and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” (Isaiah 58:6–7). The prophet, and later Jesus, insists that God will

favor those who do these acts of justice. To seek justice as a Christian then is to literally enact these and other tasks of liberation.

Christ does not preach easy activities or church as a hobby. Nor does he preach the kind of community where we all pretend we get along while ignoring the deep pain of injustice. Instead, he calls us to live in relationship with those with whom we disagree and meet the needs of those who are oppressed. By Christ's model, we learn to act on our faith and do the hard work of justice building. We are called to work toward integrity in our churches, communities, and selves. Integrity means pulling the multiplicity of our experiences into a holistic self, where the many facets of our lives all reflect our identity as Christ followers. And integrity like that involves incredibly hard work and conflict.

Communities of faith go about the work of justice in a variety of ways. They pursue legislative action on behalf of people who are incarcerated. They contribute to building low-income housing for those experiencing homelessness. Churches work to feed those who are hungry by providing hot food, stocking food pantries, and providing weekend meals for children on free or reduced lunch programs. Thriving churches are wellsprings of creative, people-centered problem solving and work to actively treat and counteract injustice. People thriving in their faith are those deeply rooted in their communities and committed to love that is shaped by justice. Living in a world so wildly interconnected, we are aware of the global scale of economic disparity, gender-based violence, human trafficking, civil unrest, and climate change. We cannot allow this knowledge to immobilize us in our work. We are also gifted with the knowledge that identifying as Christian means there is no longer a *them* and an *us*. That knowledge fuels our individual and community choices. To be Christian is to remember that we belong to each other.

As we integrate our call to justice with the way we live, we take on the mantle of justice-creator as a lifelong identity. Our actions cannot be defined by victory and defeat, but rather by our continual pursuit of justice as core to who we are as Christians. To do justice, we continue to show up for our communities, amplify oppressed voices, and work toward God's kingdom.

CONCLUSION

The work of justice is almost never convenient. If we are doing anything that lives into the call of Christ, we should frankly be suspicious if it starts to feel too easy or too comfortable. To live in this relentless pursuit of justice means that we need to learn to live righteously together, incorporating what has been seen, said, and done into the full and ongoing life of the community. This involves being able to live in tension with diverse and even conflicting views on the path toward achieving justice, centering right relationships over just being right. Above all, doing justice depends on the commitment of ordinary people to keep investing deeply and moving forward.

Particularly in US Christian contexts, we frequently invest our energy, time, and finances in short-term projects and lose interest when problems are revealed to be unsolvable by quick solutions. We move on quickly to our next passion project. We bristle when the communities we seek to serve prefer a solution that involves rejecting our ideas and good intentions. Following Christ is so much more than good feelings or trying to be nice. We are called to do justice. That means acknowledging the ways we benefit



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from injustice, and staying in the discomfort of that reality until we are moved to address and shed our hypocrisies.

Rather than resisting discomfort, we ought to pursue it in the name of moving closer to Christ. We follow Jesus, who announced the liberation of all people and insisted on justice. Let the friction between who we are and who we are called to be create the friction that sparks everlasting change. Living as builders of justice, we are drops in the rolling waters, consequential and contributing and small all at once. None of us can do justice alone, but together our drops combine to create the ever-flowing stream.

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