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## Bringing Justice and Compassion

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*It's amazing how quickly we shift from longing for justice to expecting mercy. If God's people are "to do justice and love mercy," as Micah puts it, neither of those things is hard to understand. But it's challenging to practice both of them at the same time.*

*It helps to understand what biblical justice is. As Paul Louis Metzger says, "As those justified by faith in the God of all justice, we are to experience the wholeness that he brings and extend it as citizens of his kingdom."*

*Bringing wholeness, making things right, is at the heart of God's justice. The articles in this Common Challenge show us how to do both justice and mercy, rightness and compassion. After all, God's goodness is seen in both his amazing justice and his amazing grace.*

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### What is Biblical Justice?

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#### OUTREACH

## What is Biblical Justice?

The theology of justice flows from the heart of God.

**PAUL LOUIS METZGER**

**B**iblical justice involves making individuals, communities, and the cosmos whole, by upholding both goodness and impartiality. It stands at the center of true religion, according to James, who says that the kind of "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" ([James 1:27](#)).

Earlier Scripture says, "The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern" ([Prov. 29:7](#)).

Justice flows from God's heart and character. As true and good, God seeks to make the object of his holy love whole. This is what motivates God throughout the Old and New Testaments in his judgments on sin and injustice. These judgments are both individual and corporate in scope.

One of the greatest injustices we succumb to individually is self-righteousness—the belief that we do not need Jesus but are just and good and right apart from him. We can fail to see that Jesus is the righteous "judge judged in our place" (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*) for our own acts of injustice, including our marginalizing him by refusing to sense our need for him to remove our sin and make us whole.

Only as we despair of ourselves and cling to Jesus can we participate in his work of restoring lives, the church, and the world by the Spirit of the Lord. We, the church, are to live now in light of Jesus' restoration of all things.

As we experience the wholeness that Jesus offers, we are to carry his justice forward in the world. We sense God's heart for this in James' epistle. James, like an Old Testament prophet, denounced oppression toward the poor. He saw church leaders favoring the rich and looking down on those less fortunate ([James 2:1-13](#)). James calls for the breaking down of these divisions, as God seeks to renew his people, making them whole.

The same problem still arises today, especially given the tendency in some Christian circles to downplay social justice while highlighting personal morality. Jesus rebuked this in the Pharisees: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness" ([Matt. 23:23](#)).

Both individual transformation and community transformation are part of restoring wholeness. While morality and immorality are birthed in the human heart ([James 3:10-](#)

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[18](#)), justice is centered in God's heart. We are to purify our hearts ([James 4:8](#)) whose desires lead us to sin. With transformed hearts, we are to extend God's justice to the poor, orphans, and widows, and to show no partiality.

These concerns are not limited to life within the Christian community. After all, how can we be salt and light if we practice justice among our own but do not extend it to those outside the believing community? And while the church is a visible manifestation of God's kingdom, the church is not all of God's kingdom. God is concerned with making every realm of his creation whole.

Unlike the earliest followers of Christ, we live in a democratic society where even criminals and evildoers have rights, and we have the ability to influence public policies and legislation. The relationship between morality and legislation is complex—they are distinct but not completely unrelated. We should reflect on how the justice of God's kingdom influences our involvement in matters of government.

In the Gospels as well as Acts, we see Christians ministering to the poor and marginalized, even challenging societal structures that weigh down upon them ([Matt. 9:35-38](#); [Acts 3-4](#), [5:12-16](#)). Today we have even more opportunities to extend and advance that care in our society.

In our post-Christian setting, many skeptics view religion as corrosive, divisive, and a source of injustice. But the kind of religion the Bible advocates is rooted in justice that flows from the heart of God. It seeks to bring all things into the wholeness of God. As those justified by faith in the God of all justice, we are to experience the wholeness that he brings and extend it as citizens of his kingdom.

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