

Our Calling to Pursue Peace and Justice

Vilma “Nina” Balmaceda
and Chip Zimmer

*So justice is driven back,
and righteousness stands at a distance;
truth has stumbled in the streets,
honesty cannot enter.
Truth is nowhere to be found,
and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey.
The LORD looked and was displeased
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no one,
he was appalled that there was no one to intervene;
so his own arm achieved salvation for him,
and his own righteousness sustained him.*

Isaiah 59:14–16

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*The work of justice will be peace;
the effect of justice, calm and security forever.*

Isaiah 32:17, NABRE

Introduction: Why Should Christians Care about Justice?

Many well-intentioned fellow Christians assume that, since perfect justice will only be achieved when the Lord returns, opportunities to build more just and peaceful societies in this broken world are limited to a few hot-button issues.

In our experience of serving in the peacemaking and justice fields, we have noticed that too many well-intentioned fellow Christians tend to assume that, since perfect justice will only be achieved when the Lord returns, opportunities to build more just and peaceful societies in this broken world are limited to a few hot-button issues. And yet, several of the prophets of the Old Testament as well as Jesus and his disciples in the New Testament bravely confronted the authorities and the people with messages from God that required them to seriously reconsider their attitudes and behavior toward all of life in light of the demands of God’s justice.

At a time when our world is hard-hit by the effects of great injustice, in particular the continued rise of nationalist and authoritarian tendencies that feed hatred and discrimination against those who are different and more vulnerable, the challenge of building relatively more just and peaceful communities remains quite difficult. Yet Jesus himself—in the context of a very broken reality, living under an abusive empire—prayed to God, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). This means that God’s kingdom is relevant

here and now. Even when we know that we will not be able to

see a perfect society in our time, there is much which God can do through his people to confront the prevailing expressions of deception, coercion, violence, greed, corruption, and abuse of power in today's societies.

Christians should care about justice because Scripture clearly calls us to pursue it. God himself calls us to care about justice. Justice is one of his character traits and, as creatures made in his image, we are to reflect his character.

In this article, we try to dig deeper into the relationship between justice and peace and God's will for human society. We start by considering the meaning and collective implications of the biblical concept of *shalom*. Next, we examine three aspects where all this plays out in our lives; and then we consider the complexities of the meaning of justice in the Bible. After introducing the qualities of biblical justice, we reflect on its implications in our daily lives as Christian members of society.

Understanding *Shalom*¹

Examining the Hebrew term that is commonly translated as “peace” provides a richness and breadth that is usually missing when we speak of “peace” in any modern language. For many of us, peace is mostly defined as a negative concept, consisting of the absence of outright disagreements or conflicts that disrupt our lives. Some of us may take this a step farther and refer to peace as an expression of “tranquility,” “serenity,” and, especially in the United States, “happiness.” In fact, the “pursuit of happiness” is enshrined in our

1. *Eirene* is the equivalent term to *shalom* in the New Testament. Derived from the Greek term *eiro* (“to join”), it has the additional sense of joining what had been severed or disturbed. Even though in this article we focus on *shalom* (due to its more profound significance in Hebrew culture), *eirene* is an equally powerful biblical term that emphasizes the restoration of relationships previously broken.

Constitution, and at times, US Americans react as though our conflicts with others are not only a nuisance but also a denial of our enjoyment of a fundamental right (of course, US Americans are not alone in this response). This is not a biblical view. Meanwhile, in cultures all over the world, people tend to avoid talking about difficult issues in order to “keep the peace,” which actually prevents the possibility of resolving an issue by not being willing to have an honest discussion about it.

Shalom is often rendered into English not only as “peace” but also as “completeness,” “soundness,” and “well-being.” While these terms may sound familiar in our highly individualistic culture, we must be careful not to miss the collective implications of this biblical term. *Shalom* is used in the Bible “to describe the ideal state in which the community should function.”² Depending on the

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context, *shalom* can also be translated as “restitution,” “reparation,” and even “fulfilling a contract.” It is always about relationship. In addition, it is often used in the Bible when praying for the welfare of another person, as well as when praying for the good of a city or a country.

Shalom has strong associations with truth, justice and righteousness. This suggests that the biblical conception of peace is more than a passive state of mind; rather, it is an active and dynamic attitude toward life, and it is the result both of God’s blessing and of human pursuit that accords with divine will. *Shalom* itself is a state in which all relationships are as God designed them to be. In consequence, *shalom* is not only about my inner peace with God—which is quite important—but it is rather a notion that can only be understood in community, as something to be enjoyed collectively.

Understanding that God’s will is that his people pursue *shalom* on earth has important implications for how we must care for and

2. Daniel W. Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong, *Restoring Justice* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 6.

bless one another and the world around us. It is like what physicists refer to as a “steady state” in which all the components are in equilibrium. When one part is affected, the other parts exert influence to return the whole to equilibrium. In a similar way, when conflict disrupts *shalom*, peacemaking restores it to its state of equilibrium. Of course, in a fallen world we pursue *shalom* but never attain it completely. Peacemaking, however, still functions toward restoring God’s original intent.

Different from Lerner, who insists that humans need to believe that the world is inherently a safe and just place,³ we do not understand *shalom* as the premise that all human beings are essentially good and that everything will be fine as long as we remain optimistic. To the contrary, we recognize that too much hurt and injustice exist in the world and that God’s will is that his people become active in confronting undue suffering and work to sow the seeds of justice and peace.

The Work of Christ Brings us *Shalom*

Thanks to Jesus of Nazareth’s life, so characterized by justice and mercy, and his perfect sacrifice satisfying all the demands of God’s eternal justice, we can have peace with God (Rom 5:1–2; Col 1:19–20; 2 Cor 5:18–19; 1 Tm 2:5–6). This peace with God provides the context for us to have peace with others (1 Pt 3:10–12; Rom 12:17–21) and empowers us to pursue a ministry of justice (Jer 22:16; Mi 6:8), peacemaking (Mt 5:9), and reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18–20). Jesus promises to give us his peace, a peace that passes understanding (Jn 14:27; Phil 4:7). Finally, the Bible also instructs us regarding peace with creation itself (Gen 1–2; Rom 8:18–21; Col 1:15–20).

3. Melvin Lerner, *The Belief in a Just World: A Fundamental Delusion* (New York: Plenum, 1980), 11–15.

These four dimensions are blessings given to us by Christ's work, but they are also serious responsibilities for which we are accountable to God.

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The *New Bible Dictionary* refers to peace between human beings as an important part of the purpose for which Christ died and an important part of the Spirit's work, but it also highlights the responsibility of every Christian to be active in promoting peace.⁴ Rightly understood, then, the peace we are to pursue when we invoke a full biblical understanding is more than the absence of overt disagreements; rather, it is the presence of relationships in which God's will and purposes are made apparent. When we cultivate *shalom* in our interpersonal relationships, we are capable of confronting issues of injustice openly and dealing with disagreement in an honest way, rejecting violence and unethical coercion but not turning away from real conflict to right a wrong.⁵

This is the "peace" to which Jesus's followers are called; this is *shalom*. Pursuit of this value of God's kingdom may not, in the end, make us happy, at least as happiness is popularly understood. In fact, as anyone who has lived through a serious conflict knows, seeking justice and peacemaking is tough work, and it can be dangerous. But the Bible promises that following God's will and seeking his purposes will bring us joy.

4. J. D. Douglas, ed. *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 956.

5. Of course, this will look somewhat different in different cultures, and yet honest and genuine concern for justice and peace is expected to be evident in culturally appropriate forms.

Understanding “Justice” in the Modern West

In modern understanding in most of the world, and particularly in the West, the idea of justice encompasses four elements, as Marshall notes: distribution, power, equity, and rights.⁶ When we pursue justice, we focus on ensuring that people receive fair shares of that to which they are entitled. We focus on ensuring that power is legitimately acquired and used. We seek to ensure that people similarly situated are treated similarly; and that courts and other fora in which disputes are resolved exhibit impartiality. Finally, we focus on ensuring that rights are upheld and that entitlements are honored. Marshall summarizes, “[J]ustice entails the exercise of legitimate power to ensure that benefits and penalties are distributed fairly and equitably in society, thus meeting the rights and enforcing the obligations of all parties.”⁷

Justice and Righteousness in the Bible

While embracing some aspects of a biblical view, our modern definition of justice lacks the depth that is present in Scripture, as well as the essential biblical connection between justice and *shalom*. It lacks the context for understanding and appreciating the source of the call for justice and why we should care.

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6. Chris Marshall, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1989), 6–7.

7. *Ibid.*, 7.

Justice, biblically understood, has the purpose of restoring relationships. God fulfilled all the demands of his divine justice to redeem us, but he did not discard the demands of justice. We must not assume that justice is not important in the delicate labor of helping people restore their communion with each other. While many times “restoring” (going back to the way things were before the harm was inflicted) is not humanly possible, we need to look for ways to repair the harm as much as possible.

The Source of Justice is Found in God’s Character and Priorities

Throughout the Bible, there are hundreds of references to God’s character in terms of his love of justice.⁸ In fact, when we consider the whole message of the Bible, we must acknowledge that the concept of justice distinguishes God’s will and the activities that flow from it.

In modern English, justice involves fairness and equity, while righteousness typically refers to moral purity and personal piety. In many English translations of the Bible, the Hebrew term *tsedaqah* has been commonly translated as “righteousness.” As with *shalom*, there are various other renderings, depending on context. *Tsedaqah* can also be translated as justice, fairness, doing the right thing, equity, or integrity. The term connotes human well-being, as well as right behavior. One of God’s names, attributed to the Messiah by the prophet Jeremiah, is *Yahweh Tsidkenu*, which means “the Lord is our Justice.”⁹

8. See for example, Dt 32:4; Ps 33:5; 99:4; Is 51:4–5; 61:8; and Heb 1:8–9 among many others.

9. Found in Jer 23:6.

And the beautiful tradition in the Hebrew culture of helping the poor is also known as *tsedaqah*.¹⁰

Mishpat is another Hebrew term usually translated as “justice.” This biblical concept involves two companion concerns, primary justice and rectifying justice. Critical to our understanding is that justice does not exist as an abstract concept. Rather, primary justice is the presence of relationships that reflect and uphold the inherent rights of human beings due to their equal dignity as bearers of God’s image. In the Bible, this dimension is intimately connected with righteousness, e.g., “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line” (Is 28:17).

Rectifying justice is the system that corrects and restores those inherent rights when they are not upheld. Today we would understand this as incorporating an administrative component of public justice (e.g., just laws fairly applied, judicial procedures without bias), a punishing component (e.g., sentences and fines for transgressors), and a restorative component (e.g., victims and offenders coming together to resolve the damage caused by the offender’s actions). Frequently in Old Testament passages, Israel’s leaders are excoriated both for failing to implement primary justice and for impeding the work of rectifying justice through bribery and favoritism (Dt 27:19; Mi 7:3; Is 58:6). These ancient Hebrew concerns carry over into the New Testament. Jesus of Nazareth pronounced striking condemnations of Israel and its leaders for attending to the details of the law while neglecting the most important matters of God’s law, which are “justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Mt 23:23).

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10. See Jeremiah 22:16 and the powerful connection between pursuing justice for the poor and the vulnerable, and knowing God. It is worth noting that the highest level of *tsedaqah* implies walking alongside people in need until they are able to stand on their own feet.

A Broader View of Justice

What did the Lord mean when he answered Micah’s question?¹¹ What did God mean when he required of us that we “act justly”? “Justice” is nowhere defined in Scripture. Nicholas Wolterstorff, summarizing primary justice, argues that “[J]ustice...prevails in human relationships insofar as persons render to each other what they have a right to,” that people be treated with the respect their worth requires.¹² For Christians, this brief sentence can serve as a summary of what all of Scripture has to say about “justice,” whether at the interpersonal level or at the collective level. For Scripture describes in great detail what our normative relationships are to look like, the concerns and cares we are to have for others, and the resulting expectations for how others are to treat us. For example, viewed from this perspective, the Ten Commandments are a summary of what it means to treat God and others “justly,” rendering to others “what they have a right to,” including God. When we violate God’s relational commands by failing to respect what others have a right to, we not only sin, we act unjustly. If *shalom* includes the “steady state” of primary justice that exists when the peace of God is present, rectifying justice amounts to the equilibrium-restoring actions that, when fully and rightly pursued, move God’s people toward *shalom*—the peace of God that passes all understanding (Phil 4:7).

11. “With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Mi 6:6–8).

12. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2010), 86–90.

Qualities of God's Justice

There are three qualities or characteristics of justice that are important to keep in mind: justice is dynamic, relational, and both punitive and redemptive.

*Justice is dynamic.*¹³ It is active, moving; it does not rest when injustice is present; it demands action. Justice is concerned with preserving godly order but also with confronting systemic evil, as is apparent in many of the prophets and the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁴

Justice is relational. Our God is personal and relational, and we need to understand justice in a similar way. Too often we think of justice in the abstract, as a body of principles “out there” that have little bearing on how we live. In fact, justice is not abstract at all; it is concrete since it is an expression of God’s will that gets embedded in our personal and community relationships. We act justly or unjustly toward others, either following God’s commands or violating them. Since the motives of our heart are reflected in our behavior, justice and injustice have their origin in the human heart and are, therefore, subject to the Spirit’s influence. We are to “do” justice, both before God (by obeying his revealed will) and before our neighbors (living out his will in our human relationships).

Justice is both punitive and redemptive. Justice clearly has a punitive dimension, as expressed in Romans 12:19 and Exodus 34:6–7. Justice is corrective. It imposes consequences to our wrong behavior to help us discern right from wrong. But God’s justice also has a very clear redemptive purpose in our lives. After committing

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13. Some passages that convey this dynamic sense include Amos 5:24 (“let justice roll on like a river”) and Micah 6:8 (“act justly”).

14. See, for example, Isaiah 59:12–16, quoted in part at the beginning of this article, Luke 4:16–18, and Matthew 21:12–13, among others.

terrible crimes, David cried to God, "Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed...and my tongue will sing of your *tsedaqah*" (Ps 51:14). In equal terms, the apostle John encouraged believers with this promise: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9). God is faithful to his promise to forgive us and restore the communion that our injustice interrupted. Such promise keeping is a characteristic of God's justice toward us and of its role in redeeming us "from the pit" (Ps 103:4). Similarly, we act justly when our relationships are characterized by the fulfillment of godly promises and when we show mercy and forgiveness to those who sin against us.

Implications of Justice for Daily Life

How do justice's dynamism, its relational core, and its purposes to both punish and redeem play out in our everyday lives? This happens in multiple ways.

First, the pursuit of justice leads individuals and communities to accept their responsibility, to admit wrongdoing, and to confess and seek forgiveness and reparation, not to deny their responsibility or minimize injustice in their land.

Second, justice and mercy appear interconnected in our lives. Justice exists in relationship with mercy, not separated from it. The two concepts are often juxtaposed: God expects his people to act justly and mercifully (Mi 6:8; Zec 7:9; see also Mt 23:23). God places these two qualities side by side so that they will influence one another in our daily lives. Justice without mercy is harsh and without hope, but mercy without justice denies God's holiness and minimizes his requirements for godly living. Compassionate understanding is praised in God's word (Ps 103:8–9).

Justice also has very relevant implications in our devotional lives. God's justice informs the way we are to worship him, and his counsel about how to approach him and honor him are very clear. Isaiah proclaimed, "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free...?" (see Is 58:3–10). And in the New Testament, Jesus explained to his disciples that, "If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you... First go and be reconciled to them" (see Mt 5:21–26). Notice how God's justice is active and dynamic, it is relational, and it is redemptive (although less obviously punitive in these passages). In both passages, God demands a change of heart (attitude) as well as action, so that we can genuinely bring our offering of love to his altar.

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Justice demands that we be impartial but also partial. This is an interesting paradox. On the one hand, we are commanded in both Testaments not to show favoritism (Lev 19:15; Zec 7:9; Jas 2:1). Rectifying justice includes the concern for procedural fairness in the way justice is administered in court. On the other hand, God also takes the side of widows, orphans, aliens, and the poor. A primary reason God shows such favoritism is precisely because his people were not acting with impartiality. This is an example of God's rectifying justice, of restoring society to the way he intended it to be. He singles out these groups because in Israel, as in much of the world today, they were both vulnerable and preyed upon by the powerful in their society. This favoritism is completely consistent with Jesus's teaching. He said that when the sheep and goats are separated on the day of judgment, how we have responded to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners are criteria for who gets placed in which fold (Mt 25:31–39). This does not mean that our works save us but rather that our "works"—as reflected in our treatment of

the disadvantaged around us—are an indication of our hearts¹⁵ and of whom we truly worship (Jas 2:14–26). Note again the dynamism, the relational context, and, this time, both the punitive and redemptive aspects of all these teachings. This is the context for understanding—and not merely in platonic terms—what Jesus affirmed after reading the promise of Isaiah 61 in the synagogue and his announcement that, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:16–21).

If the biblical concept of justice requires that we treat people according to their worth and render to them what they are due, it follows that when we work for the rights of the needy, we are not

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merely showing compassion or charity. Scripture refers to gifts to the poor as “acts of righteousness,” along with praying and fasting. Failing to care for the poor is not just stinginess; it is unrighteousness, and it is sinful. It is a failure of our obligation to give people what they are due, to treat them with the respect they deserve—the broad definition of justice. Doing justice involves the righting of wrongs (rectifying justice) and the creation of a community of righteous relationships (primary justice). Treating people with the respect they deserve not only involves caring for them when they are intentionally disadvantaged by others but also creating a setting in which, as God’s image-bearers, they are able to live with dignity and uprightness before God and their fellow humans. Our Lord referred to the fate of the vulnerable in society as something that should be interpreted in terms of justice, rather than simple charity. All this has both broad social and community implications, as well as profound personal implications.

15. Timothy Keller has developed a solid argument along these lines. See Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012).

Conclusion

How does *shalom* incorporate justice and how does the pursuit of justice build the sort of godly relationships that are present in a *shalomic* community? The eternal call to do justice is inherently intertwined with Jesus's call be salt and light in this world. As the authors of other articles in this volume reflect on important policy issues, let us seriously consider the implications of embracing God's justice and love of neighbor through our political thought and action.

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