
Justice and Righteousness

SCOTT HOEZEE

Anyone who has ever raised children knows that one of the first phrases children learn and begin saying already at a very early age is: That's not fair! Whatever the cause, crying "not fair" is something children do a lot. Grownups decry this, too. We believe deep down that life should be fair; that there is right and wrong; and so when unfairness or wrongness seem to come out ahead, we sense that there is no justice; that something is wrong; and so, we protest. Well, justice is a big theme in the Bible, too; and today on *Groundwork*, we begin a new series to explore biblical contours of justice. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we welcome our listeners to a four-part series on the concept...the biblical concept...of justice; and we are going to be drawing inspiration in this series from a book that came out in 2016: *The Justice Calling*, and that book was written by Bethany Hanke Hoang and Kristen Deede Johnson; and in fact, Kristen Deede Johnson will be joining us for the third and fourth programs of this series, and we are looking forward to welcoming her to the program.

DAVE BAST

Right, but in these first two programs, we want to try to set the scene a little bit, and then be able to converse with Kristen about why they wrote the book, and some of their thoughts that went into it...some of the practical lessons they drew from their study; but first, we would like to sketch out some of the biblical background...maybe call it the biblical landscape, to survey what the Bible has to say about the idea of justice, which is, after all, much in the news today. It is an important topic in our culture, in our societies, as we think about many of the people who perhaps have been less visible, who have been oppressed, even, historically, or newcomers. So, justice is a hot topic, but it has always been important from the standpoint of scripture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, there are some biblical terms that aren't much in common use anymore today. That is not true of justice, but usually where we hear about justice is on TV shows: *The Justice Files*, or there is a show recently called *American Justice*; and there is one just called *Justice*; and every single one of those shows are about cops and detectives and judges and lawyers and prosecutors and making sure that criminals go to jail and that victims get some satisfaction; and we think: That is justice. Justice is about criminal justice. Well, that is a little bit involved, but really, the biblical idea of justice is broader and more robust than just that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it is much bigger. We need to start, I think, by stepping away from our common word association ideas with respect to justice. You know, we are filled with this. Now there are reality shows on all of this stuff about cops and about, as you say, courts and judges. C. S. Lewis actually pointed out there is a whole book in the Bible called Judges, but not one of them ever picked up a gavel or donned a black robe.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it is not *Judge Judy*...it is not *People's Court*.

DAVE BAST

So, as we turn to scripture...and actually, maybe we can introduce a distinction at this point right from the outset. Much of our justice system—our criminal justice system—is concerned with what we might call retributive justice. It is punishing crime, it is deterring evildoers, it is trying to protect the innocent. That is important...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That is part of it, as you said; but what the Bible is more commonly interested in and concerned about is something we could call *distributive* justice, which is more about fairness and flourishing for everybody, so that everybody has a place at the table and a piece of the pie.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is so important to God, and we get this a lot in what we sometimes call the minor prophets—the twelve prophets in the Old Testament, which include like Micah and Zephaniah and Zechariah and Malachi, and also Amos. Let's listen to a couple of words here from Amos 5, where God through Amos is assailing the Israelites for a lack of justice in their lives. God goes so far as to say:

²¹I hate, I despise your festivals; I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. ²²Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. The offerings of your fatted animals, I will not look upon them. ²³Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps, but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, this is a classic passage, Dave. It says God is so invested in justice happening in our world, if we worship him in the absence of justice, our worship does not please him, it nauseates him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely. Those first verses are really important in setting this up because one of the chronic problems of the people of Israel...later in their history they kind of turned away in large measure, at least many of them did, from crude idolatry like worship of the golden calf in the wilderness, that sort of thing; and many of them did frequent the Temple, and they worshipped God with psalms and songs and all that, and God says: You know, that is not good enough if you are living a life of injustice and oppression; if you are grinding the nose of the poor in the mud; your praise songs make me sick. I cannot stand it!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; instead he says: Let justice roll down. In a book that Nicholas...the philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote years ago, he said: Now listen; when Amos declares: Let justice roll down like a mighty stream, he did not mean let police forces expand, let prisons proliferate, and let criminals get their just deserts; no, justice, as you said, Dave, is not just this retributive justice, where criminals get payback; it is distributive, where all people are treated fairly, which is why, as you mentioned earlier, C. S. Lewis said: If you look at the book of Judges and people like Samson and Deborah and Barack and the rest; they didn't sit behind desks with gavels and black robes. They were champions for justice sallying forth into society to make Israel treat everybody fairly.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and one of the ways that Hoang and Johnson get at this in their book, *The Justice Calling*, is by early on mentioning a number of important terms biblically, especially in the Old Testament, that expand on or accompany the idea of justice. So they talk about righteousness; and in fact, that is right out of Amos 5:24: Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. And these two things are sort of knit together in the character of God; and they also talk about holiness and shalom or peace—a term we have often referenced on *Groundwork*; and the Hebrew word *khesed* or *chesed*, which means God’s loving kindness is the old translation: His steadfast love—his long-term engagement with his world and with people, and how he won’t give up on them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that is very interesting. So, what that means is, is we are not going to know what justice is supposed to look like in our lives, in the Church, and in the societies where we live...we are not going to know what justice looks like if we don’t know what God’s righteousness looks like; because biblically there is a tight, tight link between God’s righteousness and justice on this earth, and we are going to want to explore that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about justice, especially the biblical concept, and we are looking at key passages in the Old Testament. Here is one more from Jeremiah Chapter 9, verses 23 and 24:

²³Thus says the Lord, “Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; ²⁴but let those who boast, boast in this: that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love (*chesed*), with justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight,” says the Lord.

So, there is it is, right there. If you want to know God—if you want to please God—know that he is the God of justice and steadfast love and righteousness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And righteousness; they go together, and they go together in an even better known passage, which many of us in the Church know quite well, and that is Micah 6:8: He 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. So that is our duty. Those are our marching orders, and it is not rocket science, as somebody once put it. Not easy to do, but it is not hard to understand. We need to know what God loves, what God defines as right, and then live that way.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I mean, this is part of the importance of God revealing his own character to us. God is the ruler, not only in the sense that he rules over, but he is the ruler like the straight edge, you know, that we can line up our lives against and know whether we are in sync or out of sync with what ought to be. There is another well-known image in one of the prophets, I think it is Amos; the image of the plumb line...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes.

DAVE BAST

You know, that is that weighted line...I guess they do it all digitally now...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes.

DAVE BAST

But they used to hold up a string with a weight at the bottom, and you could tell if the wall was out of plumb or not by comparing it to the line, and that is how the character of God himself functions for our concept of justice. I really do not think it is possible to have any idea of justice if you don't believe in God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What are you going to base it on? Just somebody else's ideas? I mean, exactly. There are a lot of philosophers who have said can we be good without God? Well, at some point, when you start defining what is good, what is right, what is wrong, you have to hit bottom at some point. I mean, people can disagree on this stuff, and they do all the livelong day, but when do you hit bottom? When do you find a bottom line? Well, for Christians and for people of faith, that is God himself; and what we see again and again, particularly in the Old Testament when we think about the righteousness of God and how that translates into justice in our lives, what we see again and again, and this is why, Dave, it is not just as we said about retributive justice of sending criminals to jail. It is about distributive justice, making sure that everybody has a fair shot; that everybody gets a fair shake because justice in our lives, as God's righteousness is the reference point for that, is all about how we treat other people; and particularly in a fallen world, how we treat vulnerable people.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; and if you look at the history of Israel, and God's dealings with them, and the laws that God gave them... We will look at this in this series because it is a fascinating and important part of it; but God was constantly pointing out people who were most at risk in their society, and that supremely was the widow and the orphan because they had no male to defend them—no adult male; again, without a government functioning with laws and protections and courts and police, if your own family couldn't protect you, you were really out there...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; no protection.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; and the foreigner—the stranger—who is within thy gates, as I originally learned in the Ten Commandments: The stranger within thy gates; and God is reminding his people over and over again: Don't forget you were slaves in Egypt. You know what it means to be refugees. You know what it means to be a foreigner in a strange land; so, be aware of those people in your midst and care for them—take care of them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't do to the immigrant or the refugee in your midst what the Egyptians did to you when you were the foreigner in their midst; but of course, alas, even though Leviticus and God's Law always makes extra provision for widows, orphans, and foreigners, the people of Israel went the other way, and they became self-indulgent; and when that happened, God was relentless. Listen to this raw imagery from Micah 3, where God is excoriating Israel for *not* doing justice to those who were vulnerable:

¹Listen, you heads of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel; should you not know justice? ²You who hate the good and love the evil; you tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones. ³You eat the flesh of my people; you flay their skin off of them. You break their bones in pieces. You chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.

There is nothing subtle about that!

DAVE BAST

No...wow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

God is calling the leaders of Israel cannibals. It is as though you are eating people alive.

DAVE BAST

When you mistreat them, yes—when you exploit them. Here is another passage, this one from Amos; and incidentally, these are the passages that produce the caricature of the Old Testament prophet; you know, the guy with the beard who is angry and carries a sign: Repent, for the end is near. Well, it is passages like this, and they are all about justice. So, Amos writes, or God speaking through the prophet says:

⁴Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land, ⁵saying, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale?” See, they are obeying those little provisions of the Law, but they cannot wait to get back to cheating people again. ⁷The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob, “Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because they are shaking down the poor, they are putting their thumbs on the scales and overcharging people who already don't have money, and...

DAVE BAST

And selling the needy for a pair of sandals, Amos says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Instead of making extra provision for them, they take extra advantage of them; and that, of course, is one of the great effects of sin. One of the biggest effects of sin is that it ruins shalom, and shalom is when everybody takes care of everybody else; and when that doesn't happen in a society, God is extremely angry.

You know, I heard a story once about a man who had an angel show him a vision of hell; and in the vision the man saw all of these people sitting around a huge banquet table that was groaning under the weight of the finest foods and meats and vegetables, and it was an absolute gourmet feast; and the man said to the angel: That doesn't look like hell, that looks kind of nice; except then he noticed that nobody could eat because every spoon and every fork was five feet long; and so it was hell because they could only smell and look at this delicious food, but they couldn't bring it to their mouths because the silverware was too long. So then the man said to the angel: What does heaven look like? And he was shown the exact same picture; and he said: I don't get it; why is that heaven? And the angel said: Look again. And then the man saw that everybody was taking those long spoons and feeding their neighbor across the table...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The idea being, we are here to take care of each other. That is a shorthand definition of God's righteousness and of justice in our midst.

DAVE BAST

Right; shalom has been broken. God calls us to justice. One of the oldest questions in the Bible: Am I my brother's keeper, being asked.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; right from the beginning.

DAVE BAST

The answer is yes, that is what God expects us to be; and our brother is anyone in need. So, that is a lot from the Old Testament, and we have heard the prophets' thunder, but what about Jesus? Isn't he nicer and kinder and isn't that all about grace? Well, no; I think we are going to find that Jesus, too, is just as concerned about justice in the New Testament; and we will look at that next.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, in this first of four programs on biblical justice, we have been all in the Old Testament so far; and guess what? When you get to the New Testament, that link between the righteousness of God and justice in our lives is just as snug and tight as it was in the Old Testament. In fact, in the Greek language of the New Testament, it is even a little bit more obvious to see because the word for righteousness in Greek is *dikaiosune*, and the word for justice is *dikaioi*. They are the same root word. God's righteousness translates into our lives as justice when we follow what we see now in Jesus, the perfect righteous One.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the righteousness that God demands for salvation is going to exceed anything we can produce; and so the Gospel announcement—the Gospel good news—is that this righteousness from God is given to us through faith in Christ. It is a wonderful gift of grace, and we rejoice in that; but then it sets us on a quest for actual righteousness, in our lives, in ourselves; the quest for holiness, but also the quest for shalom and flourishing and justice and righteousness in society.

We asked the question: What about Jesus and the teaching of the prophets? And of course, Jesus endorses it all and lives it all himself; but I also think of a story that Jesus told—one of his most famous stories—to a man who asked the question: Who is my neighbor? And it is the parable of the Good Samaritan, you know. This man was beset by robbers and he was wounded and he fell in the ditch, and the priest and the Levite kind of go by on the other side of the road. They are hurrying off to the Temple; and then along comes this Samaritan and shows mercy to the man, he takes compassion, meets his need; and Jesus says: Go and do likewise. That is the neighbor.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is all embodied in Jesus himself, as you said, Dave. In fact, as Paul...the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 3: ²¹But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify; ²²the righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. So, there is that linkage. Everything that was in the Old Testament...it is still righteousness; now it is concentrated in Jesus and we get Jesus through faith, and now he lives in us. So again, how we treat each other...the Good Samaritan; how do we treat anybody we run across because they are all our neighbors, and that is going to be how God defines justice now for also us as Christians in the Church.

DAVE BAST

Recently on *Groundwork* we did a whole series on the letter of James. James is kind of a counterbalance to the emphasis of Paul on justification by faith alone, but James says: Well, faith needs to show itself in works, too; and here is a classic passage taken from James 1 and James 2:

^{1:26}Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves and their religion is worthless. (Here it is, a famous verse) ²⁷Religion 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then James goes on: ^{2:14}What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ¹⁵Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food, if one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but doesn't do anything about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

And so, James is relentless on that point; but so is the whole Bible, so were the Old Testament prophets, so was Jesus. We are expected to do something; and today, Dave, in the Church, unfortunately sometimes this social action or going into society and doing things...sometimes unfortunately it gets a little controversial, because to some people it looks suspiciously political; or you know, as soon as we maybe in the Church join with an agency that isn't Christian per se...maybe it is Good Will or Unicef, or you know, whatever...the United Way; and we join with them, people say: Well, that is really none of the Church's business. The Church should just preach the Gospel and hold worship and tell people to repent, but all that social action goes beyond what we should do. Well, that is a little hard to figure out why you would think that based on the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you know, there is a historical reason for this. I mean, in the early 20th Century...late 19th, early 20th Century...a movement called the Social Gospel arose in America...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And many conservative churches were put off by it because this was basically undertaken by Christian leaders and churches that no longer seemed to care very much about people actually coming to Jesus and becoming believers and followers of him. So, there is this historical tendency to shy away from this...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; yes.

DAVE BAST

But it is not primarily political; it is not left or right. This is biblical, this vision for the flourishing of all, and doing something about it...doing something real in society. Now, recognizing that politics is really pragmatic; it is the question of how best to accomplish; and there are disagreements about the level of what government's role should be and what the role of other institutions should be. So yes, there is room for debate; there is room for disagreement. We need wisdom; we need... But the commitment to it, the desire to see that everybody has what they need; people don't suffer deprived lives, that they are not abused, that they are not taken advantage of. There are things in the world like slavery still today...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Children are sold for sex in some countries of the world. Women are exploited; women are raped persistently as an act of war. These things need to be on the conscience and heart of every Christian.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me of a story Tom Long told once of a woman named Grace Thomas, who late in life went to law school, and then even later in life decided she wanted to run for governor of the State of Georgia. She was talking about justice issues in her campaign. It was around the time of school desegregation. She was holding a rally one time and a man interrupted her and said: Are you a Communist? And Grace said: Well, no. And he said: Well, where did you get those guldurned ideas about justice and all that? And Grace thought for a moment, pointed to the steeple of a nearby church and said: I learned it over there. I learned it in Sunday school. And indeed, that is how and where we learn what that verse from Micah 6:8 earlier; God has shown us what to do, and that is to love justice and love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. That is what we do as disciples of Jesus.

DAVE BAST

He has shown us what to do. Blessed are we if we do it.

Well thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee. We would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit groundworkonline.com to tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/justice-and-righteousness>

Printed on April 3, 2025