

8 minutes 47 seconds

Reflections on Biblical Justice



On May 25, 2020, a black man named George Floyd was killed by a police officer who held him to the ground by kneeling on his neck, even as he pled for help, and repeatedly called out, “I can’t breathe.” Captured on cell-phone video, the murder went viral and like a match to a powder keg, America exploded, protesting in city after city across the land.

The length of time George Floyd was held down by one police officer as three other officers stood by, was **8 minutes and 47 seconds**.

This is an invitation to explore Biblical justice through five devotionals, each one designed to last 8 minutes and 47 seconds. They do not focus on George Floyd or others, but instead encourage you to consider the scope of God’s heart regarding equitable treatment for every human being. You will read, reflect, repent and respond, and in the final 47 seconds, wait before God in silence.

DAY ONE: JUSTICE AND THE REIGN OF GOD

Read (2 minutes)

As a little girl, royalty was for me the stuff of fairytales, a magical way of life for dreams and dress-up games. There are 25 royal kingdoms in our world today—from those romanticized royals like the Windsors, who reign but don't actually have the power to rule their land, to those true sovereigns like the *Ruling House of Saud* or *King Mswati the III* of Swaziland. What might it be like to serve at the pleasure of these men? What values drive them and what principles guide their regimes?

As followers of Jesus, Scripture not only unveils what our Sovereign is like but carefully discloses the standards by which he governs. Righteousness and justice, we discover, are “the foundation of God’s throne.” What does this mean? Why is justice, of all God’s attributes, a pillar of the throne from which he reigns?

The Hebrew word for justice, or *mishpat*, is used over 200 times in the Old Testament and encompasses a broad spectrum that includes extending protection, conferring rights and handing down punishment. Justice—treating people equitably—is not just one of many ideals in the kingdom of God, but foundational to everything Jesus does and stands for.

What would it mean for this reality to shape the lens through which you and I see our world?

Righteousness and **justice** are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Psalm 89:14

He loves righteousness and **justice**; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. Psalm 33:5

The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are **justice**. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he. Deuteronomy 32:24

But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for **justice**. Psalm 9:7

**INJUSTICE
ANYWHERE
IS A THREAT
TO JUSTICE
EVERYWHERE**

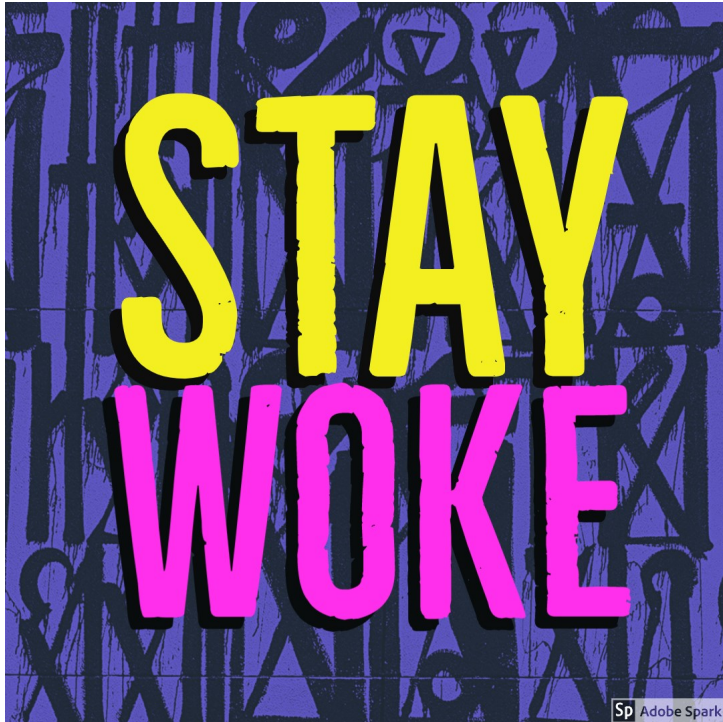
– MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

DAY TWO: GOOD AND TROUBLING NEWS

Read (2 minutes)

One of my earliest memories in church is of a “revival” preacher who showed up for a week or two. I can still see him striding across the stage, pointing his fingers, and shouting like the dickens about the fires of hell where worms feed on fallen flesh. I was terrified. I guess it should be no surprise then, that my understanding of biblical justice has been pretty much limited to the notion of punishment, of people paying the consequences for their sinful behavior.

Although righteous judgement is a facet of God’s character, scripture often links the notion of justice with human oppression. Because God is inherently just, he is compelled to defend the



cause of the needy, the afflicted, the have-nots of culture; in short, those who have the least capacity or opportunity to advocate for themselves.

To me, this is both good and troubling news. I am moved by the tenderness of my God who stands on the side of the poor, of orphans and widows and refugees and all who are oppressed. I am also painfully aware of how far I have missed the mark of God’s glory when it comes to championing these ones he feels so passionately about.

O Lord, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart;

you will incline your ear to do **justice** to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more. Psalm 10:17-18

Give **justice** to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute. Psalm 82:3

The LORD works righteousness and **justice** for all who are oppressed. Psalm 103:6

I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted and will execute **justice** for the needy. Psalm 140:12

DAY THREE: Keeping our Lists and Checking them Twice

Read (2 minutes)

The human brain, it seems, is hardwired for list-making. Something about making a list relieves anxiety, whether we do what's on it or not. This could explain in part why I used to assess my spiritual growth by checking things off my "good Christian" list. Praying daily? Check. Reading my Bible? Check. Giving regularly? Check. You get the point.

While there is nothing wrong in listing the things we hope to achieve in our spiritual journey, when that list becomes our roadmap, we run the risk of missing God's greater call, of playing our part in the grand narrative into which he has invited us.

The prophets of old took God's people to task for their list-making, but then painted amazing pictures of what could be. They told of a world where justice pours down like rain, and righteousness streams through the streets like a river, where the fatherless and widows are cared for, a world of healing and guidance and glory and light.

No list can come close to the wonder of joining God in bringing about this vision for our world.



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"What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough...When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen...seek **justice**, correct oppression; bring **justice** to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Isaiah 1:11-18 (selected)

Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let **justice** roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?...Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard... Isaiah 58:1-12 (selected)

DAY FOUR: Doing Justice

Read (2 minutes)

What does it mean to “do justice”? This question unsettles me. For as long as I can remember I’ve been offended by injustice, whether it was the teacher abusing an awkward boy in first grade, or my black friend dropping his head in the hall when I walked by at our mostly-white school. If you were to ask me how I feel about injustice, I would tell you I hate it.

But frankly, so what? I have felt raw these past weeks as I’ve realized that biblical justice is not a concept that I can tuck away in my truth arsenal. In fact, feeling offended by injustice may be dangerous, for it lulls me into thinking I’m following God’s heart.

When the prophet Micah instructs us to *do justice*, he uses the same word that describes God’s actions in creation—*asah*. “And God made (*asah*) the expanse...” (Genesis 1:7). Doing justice then, at the very least, means to bring something into being.

This is what I am trying to learn as I watch collective anger over injustice spill out in wave after wave across our nation. I cannot settle for the unfruitful frustration of my past, but must learn how to *do justice*, to bring something new into being. God, give me grace.

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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? Micah 6:8

To do righteousness and **justice** is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice. Proverbs 21:3

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. James 2:14-17



DAY FIVE: In Jesus' Name

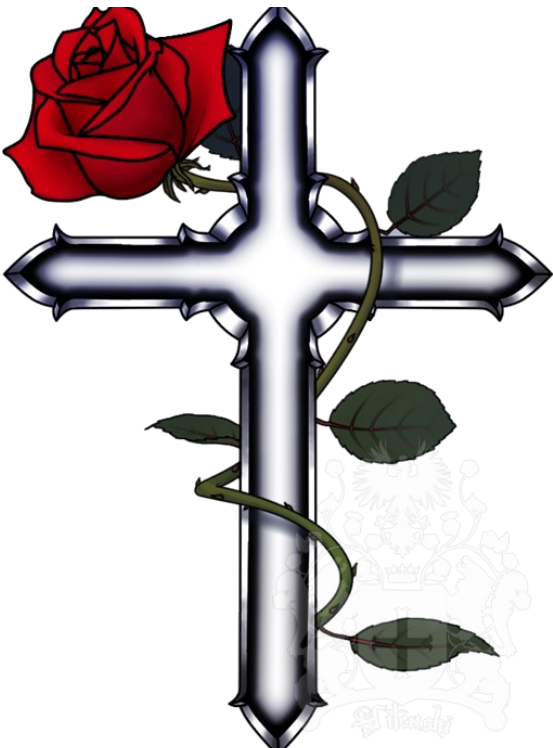
Read (2 minutes)

I have participated in my fair share of peace marches and prayer rallies for racial reconciliation over the course of my lifetime. I recently attended a community candlelight vigil and last week joined with thousands who lined the streets of my city to pray in silence for the troubled state of our land. In hours of prayerful reflection, I have pondered, "What will it take for change to come?"

I find it fascinating that when God was displeased about injustice, Scripture says he declared that no one could or would ever rescue us from our troubling propensity to treat others inequitably. God himself would have to step in, his fervent sense of righteousness fueling the fight.

Jesus, of course, is the stunning fulfillment of this. He came to earth with the promise that he would not give up until the victory for justice was won. With gentleness and tender care for the flickers of faith in broken souls around him, Jesus persevered, proclaiming justice. After great suffering, he died an unjust death to restore all that had been lost when sin sullied his splendid creation.

This Jesus haunts me and, in the end, compels me to live for his cause. Can you hear him calling: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you?" Let us join the long line of revolutionaries who were not content to leave the world as they found it. In Jesus' name, may we stay the course and be willing to lay down our lives until he finishes the task of bringing justice to victory.



Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands far away; for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter...The Lord saw it, and it displeased him that there was no **justice**. He saw that there was no man and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. Isaiah 58:14-16

"Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim **justice** to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings **justice** to victory; Matthew 12:18-20

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19
