

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND JUSTICE

Genesis 18:19

The image of Lady Justice embodies our nation's conceptions of justice - justice is blind and therefore impartial in administering a balanced, even-handed justice. It is an image that represents the dispassionate justice that we desire from our nation's legal system. While we can offer many good reasons in support of our desire for an impartial legal system, that desire - represented by Lady Justice - offers a very different picture than the Bible's presentation of God's justice; the Bible pictures God's justice as open-eyed and holding very imbalanced scales. Not only does the Bible present a picture of justice very different from the one we conceive of in our society, it portrays it as an expression of God's compassion and mercy. We will therefore explore the Bible's presentation of God's justice and consider what lessons it contains for us.

“He loves righteousness and justice”¹

- Justice and righteousness play an essential role in understanding God because they define His character (*Jeremiah 9:24*), they form the foundation of His sovereign rule (*Psalms 89:14*), and they shape His expectations for humanity (*Psalms 33:5; Proverbs 21:3*).
- It should not surprise us then that:
 - God's purposes for Abraham centered on Abraham modeling justice and righteousness to the world and that He even attached the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham on his practice of justice and righteousness (*Genesis 18:19*).
 - Micah summary of God's expectations focused on practicing justice characterized by kindness and humility (*Micah 6:6-8*).
- The two traits obviously hold an important place in understanding both God and His expectations for people, but what do “righteousness” and “justice” mean?
 - **“Righteousness”**, in the Bible, refers to a standard of right relationships with other people as defined by God while **“justice”** describes the actions one performs because of their righteousness. The two terms therefore exist in a close, inseparable relationship (*cf. Genesis 18:19; Psalm 89:14; Jeremiah 22:3-4*).
 - Given the importance of the two terms to God's identity and expectations, consider the following passages and what they reveal about righteousness and justice:
 - *Deuteronomy 6:20-25; Matthew 5:43-48* - the “meaning” of God's laws centers on establishing a “righteousness” that mirrors God's righteousness.
 - *Deuteronomy 10:17-19; Psalm 146:5-9; cf. Ecclesiastes 5:8-9* - God's righteousness ensures justice for the most vulnerable people.
 - *Leviticus 19:9-18* - God's practice of justice becomes the model He expected Israel to pursue in their own relationships.
 - *Matthew 22:34-40; Romans 13:8-10* - Love forms the foundation upon which God's expectations of righteousness and justice depend.

¹ *Psalm 33:5*; All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, 2016), unless otherwise noted.

- *Jeremiah 22:3; Ezekiel 18:5-9; Zechariah 7:8-10; James 1:27* - God expects our love-motivated understandings of righteousness and our practice of justice to focus on the vulnerable people in our world.
- A pattern should begin to reveal itself in the preceding passages - *God's vision of human relationships, whether between individual or societies, involves protections for the most vulnerable that are motivated by love, mercy, humility, and tenderness.* An important insight thus emerges:

God's standard for right relationships (righteousness) means that biblical justice involves making other peoples' problems my problems

Applications

- God offers us the example of His own righteousness as a model for our righteousness. In Romans, Paul describes God's plan to justify sinful people and reconcile His relationship with them as the revelation of His righteousness (*Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-26; 5:6-11*); *God's righteousness motivates Him to take on our sin problem as His own problem.*
- Understanding God's righteousness ought to motivate us to ask ourselves a question, ***"Since God calls me to be like Him, what then will righteousness and justice look like in my life?"***
- We can begin to discover answers to that question by looking at Jesus, who both displays God's righteousness and embodies God Himself (*cf. Romans 1:16-17; John 14:8-9*). Looking at the gospels' accounts of Jesus helps us understand that our righteousness and justice should include things like:

Developing an understanding of God's will that properly foregrounds righteousness and justice

Matthew 23:23, 1-4; 22:34-40

Speaking out against, and addressing, the wrongs we see

Matthew 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6

Selflessly helping and defending the powerless and marginalized people of our world

Acts 20:35; Matthew 19:13-15; 18:1-4

Offering genuine compassion and active help to those entangled with sin

Matthew 23:37; Luke 19:41-44; Matthew 9:9-13; 18:15-35