

Leadership Qualities: Justice

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Our mission as God's redeemed community is to engage the world with both evangelistic and social action. These two streams must never be separated. Unfortunately, however, much of the Christian world can be neatly divided into two separate categories: those who stress our vertical responsibility to God as individuals and those who stress our horizontal responsibilities to God's people as a community of believers.

This has been stated in different terms: The salvation of the soul and the improvement of society; God seeking the justification of sinners and God seeking justice in and among the nations. Yet the tension remains between those who focus more on evangelism (often to the neglect of social need, including food for the hungry or freedom and justice for the oppressed) and those who focus on the opposite extreme, neglecting evangelism or seeking to reinterpret it in terms of socio-political actions. John Stott observes, "Thus, the evangelical stereotype has been to spiritualize the gospel, and deny its social implications; while the ecumenical stereotype has been to politicize it, and deny its offer of salvation to sinners. This polarization has been a disaster."¹

Most responsible followers of Christ would agree that this cannot be an either/or proposition. Our obligations are to both pursue evangelism and work for societal change. For example, Carl F.H. Henry, in an address to the World Congress on Evangelism in 1966 stated:

Evangelical Christians have a message doubly relevant to the present social crisis.... For they know *the God of justice and of justification*.... Whenever Christianity has been strong in the life of a nation, it has had an interest in

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 338.

both law and gospel, in the state as well as the church, in jurisprudence and in evangelism.²

Socially Active Saints

Many of the great heroes of the Christian faith down through the centuries have given themselves to the care of poor, needy and helpless, particularly widows, children and orphans. Going back to the fifth and sixth centuries, it was Christians who brought legal protection to the children of the Roman Empire. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) – a contemporary of Luther and Calvin – broke with the Roman Catholic church and persuaded the council of Zurich to turn several local monasteries into orphanages. George Whitefield (1714-1770) – the great evangelist of the 18th century – devoted much of his income to the development of orphanages in colonial Georgia. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) toiled for years in the British Parliament to begin the modern movement to abolish slavery. English Missionary William Carey (1761-1834) was responsible for outlawing the centuries-old practice of burning widows in India. Later in the 1800s, Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1883), a Christian statesman, led the fight against child labor practices and fought to improve treatment of the mentally ill in Great Britain.

It is often forgotten that Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) built at least 17 homes for elderly widows and an orphanage for hundreds of children of all races and backgrounds. Eventually, Spurgeon started and/or presided (and occasionally single-handedly funded) at least 66 ministry organizations, most of which served in the poorer parts of London. We hardly need to mention organizations like the Salvation Army, YMCA and the Red Cross. Donald Whitney rightly states,

Wherever a beachhead for the gospel of Jesus Christ has been established, medicine, education and relief for the poor have followed. Whether the need is hunger, lack of drinking water, illiteracy, sickness, homelessness or

² Carl F.H. Henry, *Evangelicals at the Brink of Crisis* (Dallas: Word Books, 1967), pp. 71-72.

anything else that causes misery, Christians have been at the forefront of caring for the needs of the world. Christianity is a religion of concern for others.³

This is not merely a component of New Testament Christianity; it has been a part of God's plan for his people since Old Testament times. We only have to turn to Amos 5 to hear God tell how much more important social justice is than our meticulous observance of religious ritual,

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”

Amos 5:21-24

Judson Polling and Bill Perkins help us understand something of the context into which this was spoken:

In Amos' time, the people of Israel were prosperous. But with that prosperity they lost their spiritual edge. God was furious with them for compromising his principles in order to make a buck. In this passage Amos tells the people to “straighten out their act” and seek good, not evil [vv. 14-15]. Being familiar with Biblical truths and failing to live by them is extremely dangerous. That's the line Amos's contemporaries had crossed.⁴

The leaders of ancient Israel who should have administered justice didn't. Instead they “cast righteousness to the ground” (v. 7). The God who sees all knows what they've been up to. He indicts them by saying, “You oppress the righteous and take bribes and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts” (v. 12b). No wonder God says, “I despise your religious feasts.” They brought fellowship offerings, but God can have no fellowship with those who refuse to assist their fellows who are in need. God makes it very clear that if we are to love him, we must love those around us who bear his image.

³ Donald S. Whitney, *Ten Questions to Diagnose Your Spiritual Health* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), pp. 75-76.

⁴ Judson Polling and Bill Perkins, *The Journey* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 1195.

The leaders of Israel failed to do this, and the glory of the Lord departed from them. They maintained their highly organized religious structure and practices, but there was no power in them for the glory had left. Because of their unrighteousness and injustice, they had the form of worship without the weight of worship.

But before judgment fell on them, God offered an opportunity for repentance and restoration. He called them to turn back to him (vv. 1-15). In order to please God, the leaders needed to exercise justice and righteousness (v. 24). The imagery in this passage is profound. In contrast to streambeds that are dry much of the year, justice should flow from the nation like a river. Just as plant and animal life flourish where there is water, so human life flourishes where there is justice and righteousness.

What was true of ancient Israel is still true today. People thrive in a setting in which fairness and justice are practiced. People need to hear the good news of God's salvation; they also need conscientious followers of Christ who will come alongside them and help them in times of great need. These are the two activities you have the opportunity to engage in here that you will not have in heaven: sharing the gospel and serving people in need.

The God of Justice

In all times, places and cultures, humans have universally recognized the virtue of justice and the treacherous nature of injustice. From a biblical standpoint, the character of God is the absolute standard for justice, and our awareness of this moral standard is part of our having been created in the image of God. According to the prophet Isaiah, when God shows compassion and justice, he is simply being himself: "Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the Lord is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him!" (Isaiah 30:18).

God's fervor for justice is a component of his moral perfection, which longs for what is best for his creatures. Similarly, God's loathing for injustice is a component of his opposition to the destructive effects of unrighteousness. Sin, which can be defined as anything contrary to the character of God, always leads to the pain and degradation of injustice toward others. This is why God hates sin so much. God is not a cosmic killjoy; he merely hates that which causes pain, ruin and discrimination among his children. Stott suggests that, at its core, "sin is a form of selfish revolt against God's authority [and] our neighbour's welfare."⁵ God loathes sin because it estranges us from him and leads us to the abuse of power and desire to control others.

In contrast, righteousness, which may be identified as conformity to God's character, is exhibited in attitudes and actions of fairness, integrity, truthfulness and honesty toward others. Scripture consistently associates sin with self-centeredness, while justice and righteousness are expressions of other-centeredness. People who are overly preoccupied with themselves are injurious to their world and infect the planet with damage and hurt. But those who choose to concern themselves with the needs of others bring the fragrant aroma of Christ to a smelly world in desperate need of some serious aromatherapy.

God's passion for justice is evident from Genesis through Revelation. The poets and prophets in particular extolled this divine attribute:

The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love.

Psalm 33:5

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.

Psalm 89:14

The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.

Psalm 111:7

⁵ Stott, *Contemporary Christian*, p. 41.

Many seek an audience with a ruler, but it is from the Lord that man gets justice.

Proverbs 29:26

“For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.”

Isaiah 61:8

Justice was also a prominent concern of Jesus, conspicuous in the manner in which he transcended social, racial and economic barriers in his ministry.

Take, for example, his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-27). Jewish people in Jesus’ day hated Samaritans and justified their prejudice with religious arguments. Those who told ethnic jokes about their despised “neighbors” must have been horrified to hear Jesus making a Samaritan the hero of this story. This was roughly the equivalent of one of us telling a story about a Good Lesbian or a Good Iraqi. Blinded by our own agendas, we fail to see that God’s justice is not just for his chosen people; God wants justice and righteousness for all.

In Jesus’ story of the Good Samaritan, we encounter three distinct philosophies of life. The thieves selfishly say, “What’s yours is mine.” The clergymen, with dreadful justification, say, “What’s mine is mine.” The despised Samaritan surprisingly says, “What’s mine is yours.” He alone is worthy of being called “good,” because he alone models the character and nature of God. It’s not just a matter of what he does, but what he is.

And before we move on from this story, we may be somewhat surprised that Jesus would portray “men of the cloth” in such a heartless way. Sadly, it is often the case that those who claim to be men and women of God are the worst offenders of justice and righteousness.

Two men decided to try an experiment by recreating this parable on a seminary campus. In their study, 40 seminary students were asked to give a talk on the topic of vocational careers of seminarians. They were sent to a nearby building to record their talks. On the way a “victim”

was planted to see how these students would react: 24 of the students (60%) walked past the victim, some of them even stepped right over him to get to the recording studio.⁶

Caring for God by Caring for Others

What do you want more than anything else? If your honest answer relates to the area of self (e.g., power, wealth, fame), it will be impossible for you to be a person who strives for justice. In its fullest sense, the quest for true justice is a by-product of the pursuit of God over all other things. The oft-neglected Old Testament prophet Zechariah gives us a portrait of how true justice is expressed. The Jews who had returned to Israel after their exile in Babylon for 70 years wanted to know whether they should continue their practice of fasting and mourning during the fifth and seventh months.

The answer God sent through Zechariah was not at all what they might have expected. Their fasting (or feasting), he said, was not really for the Lord but for themselves, and their religious activity had no spiritual value because they were not accompanied by a concern for the needs of others. The prophetic oracle went on to say that it was for this very reason that their fathers had been carried into captivity:

And the word of the Lord came again to Zechariah: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.'

"But they stubbornly refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the Lord Almighty was very angry.

"'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the Lord Almighty. 'I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations, where they were strangers. The land was left so desolate

⁶ Darley, J.M., & Bateson, C.D. "'From Jerusalem to Jericho': A Study of Situational Variables in Helping Behaviour," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 27 (1973): 100-108.

behind them that no one could come or go. This is how they made the pleasant land desolate.”

Zechariah 7:8-14

In other words, God was saying that religious observances are of little value if the community has no concern for social justice. Before the exile the prophet Isaiah had dealt with the same issue of fasting and justice. Speaking to the covenant community of Judah, Isaiah had argued that true fasting should not merely be a matter of personal denial but also of social concern: “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 and break every yoke?” (Isaiah 58:6).

When true justice is administered, it is expressed in acts of mercy and compassion, particularly for those who are destitute (widows, orphans, aliens and the poor). Real justice, then, involves the application of power and influence to other-centered concerns. Such genuine justice flows out of a Christlike attitude of serving others: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

What is Good?

Leadership is a complex issue. Add the commitment to do it well, to lead in a way that is pleasing to God, and complications increase. Even a brief look at one or two books on the subject of ethics raises the levels of guilt and confusion. Oddly enough, most seminars or books on the subject of ethics and morality refuse to acknowledge that the God of the Bible is the only basis for such behavior. When asked what is the foundation for determining what’s right and true and good, most “authorities” can only reply with some variation of the old saw, “Just look within.” That can’t be right, because any biblically informed person can easily tell you what Jesus taught in Mark 7,

“For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean.’”

Mark 7:21-23

There must be some external point of reference, and this external point of reference had better be absolute. Otherwise, we are adrift in a sea of subjectivity. Frankly, a world with no absolutes would be a scary place. Thankfully, the Bible tells us that there is such an absolute standard; it’s found in the unchanging character of the living God. He alone is the foundation of true justice and beauty and goodness.

Micah 6:8 cuts to the heart of the issue, offering us a simple key to leading justly. Micah asked, “What is good? What does the Lord require?” His next admonition sounds remarkably like Jesus as he expounded the Golden Rule: Behave justly and mercifully toward other people, and walk humbly before God. It sounds like a very simple thing to do, but often the most profound things are easy to understand and extremely difficult to apply.

Everyone should act with justice and mercy, but the stakes go up when leaders are involved. Leaders decide whether customers will receive what they pay for, whether stockholders will realize a fair return on investment. Leaders decide on promotions, transfers, hirings and firings. Leaders determine the direction their followers must go. It would be dangerous and unfair to oversimplify the morass of ethical confusion surrounding these (and other) issues, but God enjoins us to think about what’s fair, just, right. Think about what will involve the least amount of pain for people over whose lives you hold power.

The only way to accomplish this monumental task is to maintain an attitude of humility. Leaders who know how to “walk humbly with [their] God,” acknowledge their own human foibles and are apt to lead humanely. Humility is merely an understanding of our profound need

and desperate condition. Humility recognizes that, apart from the grace of God, we would be ruined. Those who cry out for God to be fair, just and merciful *to them* are more apt to grant to others what they know they themselves need from God.

Stewardship and Justice

Justice isn't carried out only in a court of law. Leaders need to use their resources in an equitable way. How is that accomplished? In Nehemiah 5:1-19, Nehemiah, a man whose name is practically synonymous with godly leadership principles, advised the ancient Israelites how they could go about practicing justice.

The Jewish exiles, as they were returning, were actually selling their sons and daughters into slavery (v. 5). They were violating basic human decency, exacting usury on their own countrymen (v. 7). Nehemiah was outraged at their behavior – and justifiably so. His response was to call together a large meeting and deal with the problem, saying, “What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?” (Nehemiah 5:9). God had built into Israel's laws a means for equitable distribution of resources (Leviticus 25). He had stipulated that the land should be evenly distributed among the people, “because the land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants” (Leviticus 25:23). Israel's prophets reminded the people that hoarding resources while others suffer is a sin against God.

Like the many ancient civilizations, the Hebrews of the Old Testament attached huge significance to their land. However, unlike most pagan nations, this attachment wasn't based on the fact that their ancestors were buried there. Nor did they view themselves as landowners with absolute property rights. The land was sacred because it was God's land. Their possession of the land was in a qualified sense – really it was owned by God and they were merely stewards.

Pieces of land may be sold and redistributed as need arose, but God wisely established a year of Jubilee. Every 50th year, the pieces of property would revert back to the family who originally owned them. The year of Jubilee was a restart – a do-over. It was like an ancient version of the board game *Monopoly*. When we play the game, the object is to take the same amount of money everyone else has (\$1,700) and use it to accumulate more money, property and wealth. But at the end of the game, no matter who wins, everything goes back in the box. It would be supremely foolish to get too attached to Boardwalk or Park Place, since the next time the game is played, they will probably belong to someone else. Play the game, have fun, but hold on loosely to those game pieces. When we begin again, we'll all be back to our base of \$1,700.

This is what happens in the year of Jubilee – everyone goes back to square one. This was built into the calendar of Israel. God even placed reminders throughout their daily routines. Every seven days, call a timeout. Every seven years, let the fields rest. Stop doing so much and trust God. But they couldn't even muster enough trust to obey this sabbatical year. Interestingly enough, they refused to honor this sabbatical year for five centuries – that's 70 sabbatical years they skipped. And how long did they spend in Babylonian exile? You guessed it: 70 years! God saw to it that the land enjoyed its 70 years of rest after all. The land wasn't theirs to do with as they saw fit; the land belonged to God.

John Perkins, in his book *With Justice for All*, writes: "That truth – that we are not owners, but stewards – demands today, as then, an equitable distribution of the world's resources.... The earth and its resources do not belong to us at all, but to God." Perkins assures the reader that he is not "talking about taking all the money from the rich and giving it to the poor. That wouldn't help a bit!" Instead, Perkins asserts, "The poor need something more than

handouts. They need the means to build a better life for themselves. We must bring into the poor community the basic education the people need.... We must teach them the vocational and management skills required to start community-based economic enterprises.”⁷

Both Nehemiah and Moses required the people to redistribute resources. Neither advocated charity or handouts. Both urged those who controlled the resources to release them to those who had no means to take care of themselves. Justice is not served by perpetuating dependency but by equipping the dependent to, under God’s good hand, take care of their own needs.

Demonstrating Justice as God’s People

Abraham Herschel wrote, “Justice is scarce, injustice exceedingly common.”⁸ There are more people who ignore the poor and oppress the weak than who show concern for them. While we seek to do the right thing, it is much easier to do the wrong thing. Justice is uncommon and uncommonly hard.

Herschel goes on to remind us that most Americans associate justice with the blindfolded woman holding a scale. She often has a sword in hand. The image suggests that each person should get their fair share, that the scales should be balanced. The sword represents the power of the state to enforce such equality.

Such an image never appears in Scripture. As Christian leaders we are not guided by this sword-wielding, scale-holding woman. Rather the picture in Scripture is that of an ever-flowing river. To return to Amos, the God-approved image is a river, a never-failing stream. In God’s dream for the world, his concern is that the poor not just have enough, but that the rivers of

⁷ John Perkins, *With Justice for All* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982), pp. 153-156.

⁸ Abraham J. Herschel, *The Prophets*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 204.

justice flow down continually, that his people make righteousness toward rich and poor as endless as a mighty stream.

Our duty is to call the world to holiness and justice under the reign of God. Certainly, evangelism is a crucial part of this task. However, in addition to this, God calls us to participate in creating a better world, a world more congenial to all of his creatures. To serve people genuinely, we not only engage in selfless care for them but must also call them – along with all of their institutions – to holiness as a way of life. Such holiness, according to Leviticus 19, involves care for the poor and strangers, honesty, consideration of the handicapped and justice in all of the institutions of society. Injustice, unfairness, greed, selfishness, abuse of power and dehumanizing activities are all enemies of God and thus enemies of God's people. We must not abandon the world to live in our sheltered little forts, but we must take the battle for righteousness to a morally and spiritually impoverished world.

Without question, this is a difficult and complex issue. What tactics should we use to bring about a world that more closely reflects God's desires? Persuasion? Politics? Civil disobedience? Revolution? Although almost everyone would agree that persuasion is appropriate, there is wide divergence on whether or not political involvement and civil disobedience are appropriate in a Christian's life. These will ultimately have to be left up to the consciences of individuals. But our proclamation of justice and righteousness and holiness only has credibility when it is demonstrated in our lives.

Our mission is to model transcendent living to the world. We do this not by escaping from the world but by living in it, by demonstrating a love beyond the human, by calling for holiness anchored in the very nature of God, by proclaiming the need for divine grace without which every cultural and religious achievement comes to naught. When we faithfully execute

this mission, we display the transcendent realities of the Spirit. We do not denigrate the world and culture because they are passing away, for this world is the arena of God's glory. Rather, we elevate every task in the world as an offering to the One who is All in All.