

Theological Background

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When thinking about 'justice', some people think first about giving wrongdoers the punishment they deserve. 'Justice' evokes ideas of 'just deserts', 'the punishment fitting the crime', 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.

However, that would be a one-sided picture of justice. Justice also means giving all people - particularly the poor and oppressed - what it is right and fair for them to have: life, health, freedom and dignity. It is about acting out of a concern for what is right and seeing right prevail. It is about social justice, especially for those who suffer most and are least able to protect themselves.

In Exodus, the people are instructed to deal with everyone fairly and never to show partiality to one group above another (Exodus 23:2,6).

The Bible emphasises that 'The righteous care about justice for the poor' (Proverbs 29:7). Isaiah says: 'Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow' (Isaiah 1:17). Justice is the 'plumb line' by which society is measured (Isaiah 29:17).

According to Amos, its presence in society should be constant and abundant: 'Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!' (Amos 5:24)

Throughout the Bible, it is emphasised that justice is immensely important to God. It is fundamental to God's character. 'For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face.' (Psalm 11:7)

Justice is not about a culture which encourages everyone to insist on their own rights at the expense of others. It is about a community that knows that everyone's well-being is bound up with that of everyone else.

A commitment to justice leads to fierce opposition to injustice in whatever form it may be found. Justice is a pre-requisite of peace: without justice there can be no peace.

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Biblical References

Deuteronomy 16:19

Do not pervert justice or show partiality.

Deuteronomy 16:20

Follow justice and justice alone.

Proverbs 29:4

By justice a king gives a country stability.

Proverbs 29:7

The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern.

Isaiah 59:15-16

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 worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him.

Amos 5:24

But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.

Matthew 23:23 (Jesus criticising the religious leaders of his day)

'You give a tenth of your spices - mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law - justice, mercy and faithfulness.'