

Reclaiming the Word Justice

by Dr. Kara Powell



One of my life mantras is that balance is something we swing through on the way to the other extreme.

I know that's been true of my view of justice. Growing up in an evangelical home and church, I thought that justice was what "liberal Christians" did. As a believer, you either "preached the gospel" or you "did justice". You didn't do both.

Then I heard other solid Christian leaders talking more about justice so I decided to look into what Scripture had to say. I was shocked. I was shocked by how many

references there are in Scripture to justice. I was even more shocked by how much God seemed to value justice, both as an attribute of God as well as an attribute of our own lives. Like when the Psalmist writes, "The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed" (Psalm 103:6) and "Blessed are those who act justly, who always do what is right (Psalm 106:3).

The Prophet Isaiah references God's proclamation that "I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line" (Isaiah 28:17a). Or even more simply later in Isaiah, "For I, the Lord, love justice."

The prophet Jeremiah's declares a word from God saying, "But let those who boast, boast about this: that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (Jeremiah 9:24)

Of course, the often quoted passage in Micah 6:8 says, "He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Justice Defined in Two Words
So then I had to ask myself: what exactly

is justice? And how do we reclaim this word that is so pervasive and important in Scripture? As the Executive Director of the Fuller Youth Institute and a member of the Fuller Seminary faculty, I was able to convene a research team of faculty and Fuller students who conducted a thorough literature review on the topic of justice, studied a host of relevant Scripture passages, and interviewed innovative service and justice leaders nationwide.

The results of that research project are summarized in our book *Deep Justice in a Broken World*. When I'm teaching teenagers about justice, I usually define it in two words: righting wrongs. Poverty is wrong. The worldwide AIDS pandemic is wrong. Homelessness is wrong. Children traumatized by violence is wrong. Disparate educational experiences based on socio-economic class is wrong. God invites us as his followers to right the wrongs around us.

Reclaimed Justice: Insights from Hebrew
For those who want an even deeper understanding of what it means to reclaim God's justice, we can turn to the Hebrew word *shalom*. From the very beginning, God's plan has been to establish his *shalom* over all creation.

The word *shalom* is commonly translated as "peace" — but that often reduces it to one of two inadequate definitions: either we think of it as the absence of war and conflict, or we tend to view it as a sense of personal, subjective peace for us as individuals.

In reality, *shalom* has a much wider meaning that brings greater depth to our understanding of justice. Biblical *shalom* is far more than just a lack of fighting or a warm and fuzzy feeling.

In describing *shalom* and its relationship to justice, Nicholas Wolterstorff, professor of philosophical theology at Yale University, writes:

The state of *shalom* is the state of flourishing in all dimensions of one's existence: in one's relation to God, in one's relation to one's fellow human beings, in one's relation to nature, and in one's relation to oneself. Evidently justice has something to do with the fact that God's love for each and every one of God's human creatures takes the form of God desiring the *shalom* of each and everyone.¹

God's *shalom* is an all-inclusive peace that encompasses our whole selves and all our relationships: with God, with self, with others, and with the world. When humanity fell, that sense of well-being was broken, leaving in its wake darkness, pain, and death.

Despite our rebellion and the sin-filled consequences that leave the whole of creation "groaning" (Romans 8:22), God has not wavered in his commitment to restore His *shalom* through justice. We know this from Jesus' own words in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus wants all who are imprisoned and oppressed — physically, relationally, emotionally, or psychologically — to experience the freedom and release of his kingdom *shalom*. That is the call of kingdom justice — to follow the call of the Holy Spirit and fight against anything that would stand in the way of *shalom* for those God loves.

Reclaimed Justice: Insights from Greek
Just as our interest in reclaimed kingdom justice can't help but be increased by a deeper understanding of the power of *shalom*, the same is true with a deeper understanding of the word *dikaiosune* (pronounced "dih-kyoh-sue-nay"). In general, this Greek word used in both the gospels and the epistles is translated "righteousness." While that is an accurate translation, it's not the full story. *Dikaiosune* also means God's just rule or — God's justice.

Let's look at a few of the more well-known verses that include the word *dikaiosune* in light of this expanded, or secondary, meaning. For instance, Jesus teaches, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *dikaiosune*, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6) and "But seek first His kingdom and His *dikaiosune*, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

When we insert the word *righteousness* for *dikaiosune* in these two passages, our North American minds often associate it with an individualistic form of right-living that falls in line with those who equate the gospel with personal salvation. As long as we do not "smoke, drink, chew, or go with those who do," we're honoring Jesus' intention.

What happens when we insert the word *justice* for *dikaiosune*? Suddenly, our minds jump to a new form of right-living that is much more holistic. Echoing the powerful meaning of *shalom*, with *dikaiosune*, we likewise seek to become people who hunger and thirst to extend God's kingdom to meet others' spiritual, emotional, social, and physical needs.

Moving Beyond Either/Or to Both/And
The more I've looked closely at Scripture as well as Jesus' own life and ministry, the more I'm compelled to move beyond my earlier myopic understanding of justice. It's true that many followers of Christ today fall into two camps: those who are focused on evangelism (e.g., letting others know about Jesus through our words) and those who are focused on justice (e.g., letting others know about Jesus through our actions). But I don't think that's what God intends.

I think God intends for us to be people who are both about sharing about Him through our words and through our actions. True love meets both spiritual and physical needs.

Reclaimed Justice Asks Why
As a practical theologian, I'm convinced that reclaimed justice is not afraid to ask why the world is broken, and then take steps to fix it.

Why invites us to truly listen to and get to know the voiceless in our world.

Why requires a long-term perspective because poverty and powerlessness cannot be eliminated in weekend bursts of activism.

Why invites us to interact with social systems — because we cannot truly help individuals until we also change the systems that rob dignity.

Why forces us to face the truth about our own participation in the systems and structures that rob the poor of opportunities.

One word of warning: Why? is not a popular question. Others may question you and your motives when you ask why. Helder Camara, the Brazilian Roman Catholic Archbishop: once commented, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are poor, they call me a communist."²

My dream is that when we ask why the poor are poor, people call us Christians.



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Deep Ministry in a Shallow World, *The Good Sex Youth Ministry Curriculum*, and the upcoming *Essential Leadership*.

¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The contours of justice: An ancient call for *shalom*," in *God and the Victim: Theological Reflections on Evil, Victimization, Justice, and Forgiveness*, edited by Lisa Barnes Lampman and Michelle D. Shattuck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 113.

² Tony Campolo, "Reflections on Youth Ministry in a Global Context," *Starting Right*, edited by Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 92.