



# JUSTICE

## God's heart. Our way.

### INTRODUCTION

Justice is a core theme throughout the biblical story. We often think of justice as what happens when someone who does something wrong is punished for it, but justice in the Bible is so much more than that. Or, we think of justice as some kind of peripheral elective in the school of faith. Justice in the Bible is primarily about making sure that everyone in the community is treated fairly and given what they are due as a human being. It's about granting people rights by changing unjust practices or laws so that no one slips through the cracks. And, as we'll discover in this study, God cares about it and cares that we care about it too!

Beginning and End

God Cares

Quartet of the Vulnerable

Worship + Justice

Required Living

Heart of the Kingdom

Heart of the Cross

Heart of the Church



# JUSTICE

## Beginning and End

### Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What was the last thing about which you said, “Wow. That was good?”

**Scripture:** Genesis 1:26-31; Revelation 21:1-5

Then God said, “Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth[d] and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them....And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more. There will be no mourning, crying, or pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” Then the one seated on the throne said, “Look! I’m making all things new.”

### Discussion

1. Why do you think that God created human beings last?
2. What does being made in God’s image have to do with human dignity and worth?
3. What do you think are the things that all human beings deserve?
4. The word for “good” in Hebrew is tov. It also means whole or fulfilling purpose. What do you think it means that God declares everything very tov after making humans?
5. What does it look like in our world when things are tov?
6. What does it look like when they are not tov?
7. What might be the relationship between justice and tov?
8. What does the hope of Revelation 21 describe? How is it a vision of justice?

### Big Idea

The beginning and ending of the biblical story reveals a God who, out of love, creates a world and human beings to live in that world. God creates them in his image thereby imbuing them with inherent worth and dignity. God cares about the flourishing of these human beings and all creation. God desires things to be tov or whole/fulfilling its purpose. When they aren’t, there is injustice. At the end of the story, God makes all things new and there are no more injustices to cause tears or pain. Everything is Tov again.



# JUSTICE

God cares

## Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What is one of your first memories of noticing something was unfair?

**Scripture:** Exodus 1:13-14; 3:7-10

So the Egyptians enslaved the Israelites. They made their lives miserable with hard labor, making mortar and bricks, doing field work, and by forcing them to do all kinds of other cruel work.

Then the Lord said, “I’ve clearly seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I’ve heard their cry of injustice because of their slave masters. I know about their pain. I’ve come down to rescue them from the Egyptians in order to take them out of that land and bring them to a good and broad land, a land that’s full of milk and honey, a place where the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites all live. Now the Israelites’ cries of injustice have reached me. I’ve seen just how much the Egyptians have oppressed them. So get going. I’m sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

## Discussion

1. What kinds of injustices are the people of Israel experiencing?
2. How do unjust systems like this begin?
3. What happens to people in a system like Pharaoh’s?
4. In Exodus 3, God is speaking to Moses. What does God say to Moses about the enslavement of the Israelites? What words are used?
5. What does God’s speech reveal about God’s heart and priorities?
6. What is God committed to doing about the injustice? What is the role of other human beings in this work (Like Moses)?
7. What might these scriptures tell us about the relationship between God’s heart for justice and our own human responsibility?

## Big Idea

This scripture makes it plain: God cares about justice. God notices when things are not right; God notices when human beings are oppressed by systems and people that perpetuate harm and God wants to liberate people from those situations. And, God intends to work through human beings to help achieve justice and flourishing!



# JUSTICE

## Quartet of the vulnerable

### Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What are the “safety nets” you feel like you can rely on in your life?

**Scripture:** Deuteronomy 24:19; Isaiah 1:16-17; Zechariah 7:9-10

Whenever you are reaping the harvest of your field and you leave some grain in the field, don't go back and get it. Let it go to the immigrants, the orphans, and the widows so that the Lord your God blesses you in all that you do.

Wash! Be clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

The Lord of heavenly forces proclaims: “Make just and faithful decisions; show kindness and compassion to each other! Don't oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor; don't plan evil against each other!”

### Discussion

1. What are the similarities between what God is saying in these three passages?
2. Who/what groups does God seem particularly to be concerned about? Why?
3. What are the words associated with injustice and the words associated with justice?
4. From these passages, what do you think God expects from God's people when it comes to doing justice?
5. What groups would you add today to this list of the most vulnerable?
6. What might seeking, helping, pleading, defending, showing compassion look like today?

### Big Idea

Scholars refer to the “quartet of the vulnerable” who are lifted up in the Bible: widows, orphans, immigrants, and “the poor.” In other words, those with the least social power and most susceptible to harm. God has particular concern for the most vulnerable and holds God's people accountable for how they are treated. To do the work of justice is to look out for the needs of people who are particularly vulnerable and advocate and act alongside them and, when they have no voice, to advocate and act on their behalf. God loves and defends those with the least economic and social power, and so should we.



# JUSTICE

Worship + Justice

## Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What are two things that you would say just belong together?

**Scripture:** Isaiah 58:5-8; Amos 5:21-24

Is this the kind of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one's head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn't this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly.

I hate, I reject your festivals; I don't enjoy your joyous assemblies. If you bring me your entirely burned offerings and gifts of food—I won't be pleased; I won't even look at your offerings of well-fed animals. Take away the noise of your songs; I won't listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

## Discussion

1. What are some common elements or themes shared in these passages?
2. Why is God so upset with the people and their worship?
3. What specific things is God rejecting?
4. What does it seem like God really cares about instead?
5. What do you see as the connection between worship and justice?
6. What happens to our worship when we aren't committed to justice?
7. What might happen to our commitment to justice if it's not worshipful?

## Big Idea

These passages are a few among many that make a clear point: You cannot separate right and true worship of God with a commitment to true justice. Our worship of God...whether it's showing up on Sunday and singing or practicing fasting...falls completely flat and is void of any heart and meaning if it is not accompanied by a commitment to justice for human beings. True worship means real justice.



# JUSTICE

## Required Living

### Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What do you think is *required* for living “the good life?”

**Scripture:** Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:34-40

He has told you, O mortal, 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?

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had left the Sadducees speechless, they met together. One of them, a legal expert, tested him. “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He replied, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

### Discussion

1. What do you see as the relationship between doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with God?
2. Why do you think the prophet Micah lifts those up as something God demands/requires?
3. What do you see as the connection between the Micah passage and the Matthew passage?
4. What is the relationship between loving God and loving neighbor? Why does Jesus list two things as the greatest commandment?
5. Do you think Jesus’ response is the answer that the religious leaders wanted or expected? Why or why not?
6. Is it possible to love your neighbors without “doing justice?” Why or why not?
7. Conversely, how is doing justice loving your neighbors?

### Big Idea

We often wrestle with what God wants us to “do with our lives,” usually thinking about careers. At a more basic level, we’re told exactly what we’re supposed to do with our lives. We’re supposed to do justice, love mercy, walk with God and love our neighbors. They’re all joined together in our purpose as people made in God’s image. We love God and walk humbly with God precisely as we love our neighbors and do justice with and for them.



# JUSTICE

## Heart of the Kingdom

### Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What do you think of when you think of a “mic drop moment?”

**Scripture:** Luke 4:16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

### Discussion

1. This was not just a mic drop moment. It was the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. What does it mean that Jesus started out by saying this?
2. What elements of justice do you hear Jesus talking about?
3. Do you hear any similarities between what Jesus says here and other passages of scripture we’re talked about in this study?
4. What does he mean by saying it’s been “fulfilled in their hearing?”
5. From what you know about Jesus and his kingdom ministry, how does this message reconcile with what he did while on earth?
6. Where do we see Jesus committed to justice in his ministry?
7. What do these words and Jesus’ own ministry have to do with you and me today?
8. What would have to be true for these things to be at the heart of the church’s mission and ministry?

### Big Idea

Just like Jesus embodied God’s love, so too did Jesus embody God’s heart for justice. Almost everything about his ministry was about helping and liberating people to experience wholeness and flourishing as image bearers. He cared about those on the margins and those who were the most vulnerable. It wasn’t a side gig. It was at the heart of him inaugurating God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven. As Jesus followers, justice should be at the center of our faith too!



# JUSTICE

## Heart of the cross

### Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** What word comes to mind when you think of the cross?

**Scripture:** Luke 23:32-34; Romans 3:21-26

They also led two other criminals to be executed with Jesus. When they arrived at the place called The Skull, they crucified him, along with the criminals, one on his right and the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing." They drew lots as a way of dividing up his clothing.

But now God's [justice] has been revealed apart from the Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. God's [justice] comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There's no distinction. All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, but all are treated as [just] freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus. Through his faithfulness, God displayed Jesus as the place of sacrifice where mercy is found by means of his blood. He did this to demonstrate his [justice] in passing over sins that happened before, during the time of God's patient tolerance. He also did this to demonstrate that he is [just] in the present time, and to treat the one who has faith in Jesus as [just].

### Discussion

1. How do we see both injustice and justice on display through Jesus' death on the cross?
2. How might we see Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross as a divine response to human injustice?
3. What is the relationship between human sin and injustices? Between mercy and justice?
4. How can we flawed human beings be found to be just? How does Jesus make that possible?
5. What is the connection between being made right through Jesus' death and resurrection and our commitment to justice?
6. How does Jesus' death and resurrection give us the power to confront injustices?

### Big Idea

There's injustice everywhere. Some people actively perpetuate injustice. Others receive benefits from unjust social structures they take for granted. We're all the guilty ones. But the surprising message of the cross is that God's response to our legacy of injustice is to give us the gift of the life of Jesus. Jesus did justice and yet died on behalf of us the guilty and rose victorious and vindicated from the grave. He is victorious over the powers that perpetuate injustice and we are declared right or just before God. We experience this "just mercy" of God as a change both in our status and as a power to work for justice in the world ourselves.



# JUSTICE

## Heart of the church

### Opening Prayer

God of mercy and justice, we know that you love and care about the world that you made, including all your people. You made every person in your image and desire our good and our flourishing. Lord, help us to long for the day when we will see justice rolling like a river through our towns and nations. Even now, imprint more of your just character on our souls so that we will see things like you do and act in ways that are just and right. Amen.

**Opening Question:** How would you describe a “religion?” What makes something a religion?

**Scripture:** Acts 6:1-6; James 2:26-27

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews[a] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

### Discussion

1. How did the early church respond to an injustice experienced by Greek Jewish widows?
2. What does the appointment of specific men to this responsibility say about the church’s commitment to justice?
3. What are the characteristics of someone who considers themselves religious?
4. What does God desire to be a part of a religious life?
5. What do you think it means to look after widows and orphans in their distress?
6. What other vulnerable and marginalized groups do you see under distress right now?
7. What would have to be true for “looking after them,” or justice to be a part of your religious life?

### Big Idea

If the church is the body of Christ and an extension of Jesus’ ministry, then it only makes sense that the church would follow in the way of Jesus when it comes to justice. To be religious in devotion to God is to be religious about caring for the vulnerable and marginalized. Justice is at the heart of the church’s mission just like it was for Jesus. We are called to ministries that help those falling through the cracks.



# JUSTICE

God's heart. Our way.

## **Wrap-Up**

What is the biggest thing God is saying to you after this study and these conversations?

What are you going to do about it?

What are your next steps?