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Recommended Citation

Cockrell, Ben, "What is Social Justice?" (2017). *Social Justice Class Papers*. 5.
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/sjus/5>

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Benjamin Cockrell

Intro to Social Justice

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12 December 2017

What is Social Justice?

A common concern has permeated modern society and undergone countless hours of struggle, disappointment and heartache. Philosophers, scholars, and teachers alike have weighed in on a burdensome yet pointed question: “What is social justice?” The phrase carries with it a frustration with the way the world handles its problems, and an even greater pain coming from the lack of suitable avenues through which to ameliorate them. Despite our overwhelming, exhaustive searches for social justice solutions, crises seem to arise with increasing frequency. One begins to think, then, if social justice continues to be a thorn in the side of society, it must be adequately defined in order to tackle the problem. As a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ, social justice is defined not merely by *what* it is, but by *who* I follow. So this paper will explain God’s heart for social justice, how that is detailed by the life of Jesus Christ, and how those that follow him possess the key to the most effective solution for social justice. This is not to say that those with other beliefs cannot define or enact social justice, but it is to say that by following Christ, the door opens to the most effective approach. So through that lens, I approach this question by explaining first the biblical roots of the concept of social justice, and then by highlighting the aspects of Jesus’ character that illuminate his passion for social justice.

Biblically, social justice language coats the entirety of scripture, and most specifically, the issue surfaces frequently in the Old Testament prophetic literature. The books of Isaiah and Amos particularly illuminate God’s heart for social justice and spur followers of Yahweh to

follow the commands of their God. The prophet Isaiah stated “This is what the Lord says: Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed” (Isaiah 56:1 NIV). Many wonder what “doing what is right” constitutes, and in the case for biblical social justice, this comes not only from the Ten Commandments, but also from the very character of God. God cares for all people and loves all that is good, just as 1 John 4:8 explains: “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8 NIV). Human nature is inherently sinful, and it is only through the empowerment of God that one can live righteously. People cannot live a life of righteousness and of carrying out social justice in their own strength, but they are made able by trusting in the power of God (Hays 136). This aspect of social justice was explored in my studies of Old Testament Prophets last year. By exploring the faithfulness of godly men like Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah, and Micah, I was able to focus social justice in on one issue. That is that humans will continually, without fail, revert to sinful ways unless they are devoted to the empowerment of God. Men like Isaiah and Amos were not holy, perfect beings, but they understood the heart of God enough to explain it to others.

Amos, a prophet during tremendous economic growth in Israel, wrote to the nation that even though prosperity seemed to be rampant, so was inequality. Yahweh noticed this and declared “You trample on the poor and force him to give you grain,” and that the nation of Israel must “Hate evil, love good; maintain[ing] justice in the courts” (Amos 5:11, 15 NIV). His focus here is that worship of a deity can be empty if it is not accompanied by action, and that prosperity among a few does not constitute prosperity for society as a whole. James wrote later in the New Testament that “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17 NIV). Faith in God does not magically create a panacea for social justice. Action through one’s faith brings about social justice naturally, as God brings people to the love, peace, joy, and

justice that God is defined by. Christians everywhere constitute one “body,” (1 Corinthians 12:27 NIV) and all parts of the body are thus bound by the law of God, which outlines such a life of love. In the fourth chapter of Alex de Vaal’s book, *Advocacy in Conflict*, Roddy Brett postulates that modern international society has been laced with certain “new social movements” which are characterized by “the importance of the role of collective identity to the recognition, interpretation, attribution, social construction, and the framing of common interests” (De Waal 72). These movements surface because of an underlying factor: the need to belong. Collective society maintains social injustice because “insiders” exclude “outsiders” from their collective identity, isolating them and in many cases, impeding “outsider” ability to move forward in society. Those outsiders are also commonly mentioned in the Prophetic literature of the Bible. The prophet Zechariah teaches that Christians are called not to “oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other” (Zechariah 7:10 NIV). These groups mentioned were commonly seen as “outsiders” in Biblical times, and times have not changed in that regard. These examples and scriptures point to God’s heart for social justice, and show that the biblical root for social justice finds soil in the characteristics of God, and in his word spoken through the prophets.

The direct manifestation of God’s nature unveils itself through Jesus Christ, written down in the New Testament. I try to emulate how he lived and what he focused his time on. Much of his time focused on the care for the down trodden and the oppressed, and he is the ultimate template for which to live a social justice-minded life. The world does not lack an abundance of role models, but it does lack a devotion to the ultimate model that is Christ. In Luke 10:25, Jesus explains the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a member of an opposing group (the Samaritans) helps one outside of their collective identity (a Jew), breaking social norms but

bringing social justice in the process. The Samaritan healed the wounds of the Jew physically but also wounds compounding from years of inter-group conflict. The story conveys compassion, love, and a servant's heart among other concepts. After stating the parable Jesus commands: "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). If we as a populace were to live out these traits, social justice would be a much less prevalent issue. This year, living as one who mimics Christ has been a challenge and also an incredible time of growth. I originally came to Ouachita with the intent to go out and work with the community often and through a plethora of different organizations. I planned to do it independently as well. While I have taken initiative in this venture, my time here panned out slightly differently. This year I am an apartment manager and one of two speakers for our ministry called Refuge, which means that I speak every other week. Both positions take up considerable time, and sometimes I feel as though my time could be better served out in the community working with those that need Christ's love, not stuck inside talking about it. That is largely what this paper seeks to iron out and make clear. To live like Christ is not to merely flaunt his characteristics in beautifully crafted sermons and printed materials. That being said, if Christ's people are not reminded of his heart for social justice, and if they are not constantly learning more about who Christ is, then their passion for seeking social justice diminishes. That is where speaking at Refuge comes in, and I was blessed with the responsibility to have such a position. The ministry is an opportunity to understand Jesus better by studying his word and then teaching it to others. By doing this, my identity becomes more grounded in Christ rather than myself, and my heart for social justice becomes all the more passionate.

This search for identity surfaces in all aspects of life, and is a universal exploration for everyone on the planet. Ta-Nehisi Coates explores identity extensively through his work *Between the World and Me*. His work is structured as a short book written to his son regarding

racial inequality, the identity of being black in modern society, and how to deal with being who he was created to be. As I thumbed through the chapters once again, I found portions that I highlighted or dog-eared to look back on. Almost every section I re-read, in some way, emphasized Coates' subscription to an identity fixed in West Baltimore, and that because he grew up there that is how he will be defined for the rest of his life. He explains to his son that he must look out for the "destruction of black bodies," and the "torture and enslavement of the mind," as he grows up outside of West Baltimore (Coates). I read his words and my heart hurt for the pain that he experienced, but hurt more because his identity was so fixated on the fears of his life, which stemmed largely from America's racist past. In the book of Romans, the apostle Paul declared: "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8:15 NIV). Coates tries throughout his book to explain the fear that possesses him, but even on the last page humbly writes, "I felt the old fear" (Coates 152). I understand fear, because it is a powerful force that can easily trap us all. I see Coates as still trapped by it, and therefore his understanding of the world and how to fix the world's justice problems is also trapped by it. This cycle is not easily broken, but can be broken by surrendering to God and by finding one's identity in who He is, not what one's past has defined it as.

Christ's characteristics also illuminate his heart for those who are less fortunate than others. Beyond showing a perfect example for living a life for social justice, he explains who commonly needs help and why. Jesus's disciples asked him in the book of Matthew, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?" and he responded, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me" (Matthew 25:44-45 NIV). Often social justice is seen in the

light of providing needs for those that lack something. This is a large part of social justice, whether it be working at a soup kitchen, rescuing children from sex trafficking, or building houses for those that do not have one. All of these accomplish a goal, but if it is not done for the glory of God, it is not done most effectively.

God asks Christians to care for those that need it, and in doing so, we are caring for him. We do these things not so that we feel better, get hours on a transcript, or even to make our public image greater. We are called to do it because God first loved us, and we show our love by loving those he loves. Jesus said in Matthew 22, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ (Matthew 22:37-39 NIV). If the love of God is shown to one another, social justice naturally comes as a byproduct. Half of social justice lies in the definition of each individual word, social and justice. Social is literally defined as “dealing with society, or with its constructs,” so in essence it deals with people. Dealing with people takes grace, love, compassion, self-control, and many other traits, all of which are embodied by Jesus Christ. His example proves that social justice can be led by one who lives in order to serve others in love. And it is by that example that I choose to live, and to base social justice upon.

After taking a sociology of crime and deviance course here at OBU, I more greatly understand the power of being set apart as a Christian. Especially with regard to social justice, Christians look profoundly different than most of the rest of the world, if they truly follow the Christ they claim to. Deviance among them runs rampant, though. Deviance is generally understood as the breaking of social norms that is then reacted negatively to by an audience. “Christians” seem to do this often, being stuck on both sides of that spectrum. In fact, Christians

are sometimes better known for what they are against rather than the love they stand for. This is a common occurrence among any group that other groups do not agree with. Out of this deviance and group-on-group misunderstandings, social injustices can occur simply because members of each respective group do not accurately portray the norms decided upon by the whole. This can be reflected onto the nation and international scale as well. Andrew Solomon's work *Far From the Tree*, explores various aspects of society that people have misunderstood. One of those aspects is crime. Crime is an injustice to society, but as Solomon argues, the injustice commonly occurs before the crime is committed, implanted into the brain of one who has struggled against adversity in their past (Solomon). "Criminals," then are members of society who break societal justice for reasons that far outpace maliciousness. A man robbing a grocery store could be lacking food, a couple robbing a bank could need money to help raise their infant child. There are a variety of issues behind criminal activity, accurately paralleling the complexity of social justice. I admit, social justice is ambiguous. It is hard to define, I do not even define it in a paper entitled "What is Social Justice?" I do not define it because social justice is always changing. It is always shifting based on cultural, historical, and societal needs. Christians need to adapt to these needs and meet them with the love of God. Because no matter how much this world changes, God will always be relevant. So with that relevancy, I move forward into the purely action-based aspect of my understanding of social justice.

Actively living out social justice constitutes one of the most frustrating and arguably slow aspects of the process. I've studied Political Science at Ouachita for the last four years, and from an economic perspective, John Maynard Keynes says "In the long run, we're all dead." From that perspective, it should not matter whether we do anything with what we know. It is inevitable that we will all die and so it is pointless to try to fight a battle already won. Social justice can

sometimes run in the same vein. Pessimists can reign in this debate, arguing that action associated with social justice can only be accomplished when one accepts the fact that failure is imminent and inevitable. God gives his followers a different perspective, showing that through Christ's death on the cross, the battle between good and evil has already been one and Christians have the power of the "winning side." So, our actions do matter, and the time that we each have on this earth can either be used to worship God and utilize his power, or remain stuck in a cycle of evil, lies, and fear.

I have embarked on journeys across international borders in Asia, Europe, and Africa, in order to further the cause of the gospel and bring with me the ultimate remedy for social injustice: God himself, and all that he is. Everywhere I have gone I've found similar people. Struggling people. People who do not have enough. Everywhere I have gone, social injustice has been a problem, even in my own backyard. While in my social justice course, we have studied many theories on social justice and visited a few organizations that seek to us resources to combat injustice. This is where the rubber meets the road. As a Christian, I understand the responsibility it is to be an advocate, and a vessel through which social justice flows. I also need to keep in mind that the love and mercy coming from my actions is a direct result of my devotion to the Lord. Action begins on the personal level. Working on the personal level allows me to interact with people, hear their stories, and create change because of the problems that I see in my community. There is not specific way in which to get involved with social justice. There is not a formula or a process that one must complete in order to begin combating social justice. A common misconception is that one must find a quality organization or superior on which to "springboard" into action. The action starts with our desire to find change.

As a Christian, my action is directly contingent upon the trust and reliance I give to God. Through reading his Word and praying to him, I am better equipped to grasp society's needs, which is God first and foremost. By meeting this first need, other societal needs begin to fall in place. It still takes time and the process can be long and arduous, but it is the most effective route through which to attack social injustice. In Ephesians 6, Paul explains this further by saying: "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12 NIV). There is a battle going on around us all the time, but we must be able to understand it first, and then attack with everything we have: the overwhelming power of God.

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