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1003.0 Social Justice

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What is Social Justice?

The term social justice is a very broad word with many both positive and negative connotations for different people. It is hard to define a term whose meaning is subjective to the one talking about it. As I have been growing in my knowledge at Ouachita about injustices in the world, life in general, and my faith, my perspective on many things have shifted as well as been widened. My first thought at the beginning when I chose Social Justice was that I want to learn to help people like Christ as I prepare for law school. That was it. Now, I have a grasp (even though it is small and constantly changing) on the vastness of what social justice really means. Social justice is the pursuit of equity in the community and society as a whole, working to fix laws, or other restrictions, which cause individuals to become stuck in the problems they face, while caring about each individual.

The first part of the term social justice is the word “social.” Cambridge Dictionary defines social as, “relating to society and the way people live together” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). A common synonym for the word is community. The term social justice, in and of itself, reminds us that we are to aid the people around us not simply to solve our own problems. It is the act of truly loving everyone around us as we love ourselves (*English Standard Version*, Mark 12.31). As people pursuing social justice look at different areas that contain injustices in the community,

there is a problem that arises. What/who decides how community and society should look, and what is the standard?

For Americans, there is the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, which provides certain rights that all Americans are guaranteed. In the Declaration of Independence, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are “unalienable rights” to which “all Men” are promised (“Terms to Know”). At the time, there was large discrimination in the country with slavery being legal, so these rights were not indeed available to everyone. However, over time, the Constitution and Amendments has given freedom and rights to every group of people. Amendments I, XIII, XIV, XV, XIX, and XXVI all discuss ways America has taken steps in reducing the prejudice that was and still is present, such as the freedom of people to vote, ending of slavery, and more. The discrimination between people among government policies is being diminished, hypothetically allowing all Americans the ability to have these rights regardless of race, gender, age, or religion. (Baltzell).

As a Christian, community is a vital aspect in the Christian faith. From the beginning of time, God created Eve to accompany Adam because God did not want man to be alone. He desired community between people. The Church is supposed to be a reflection of heaven with many believers all gathered together to worship God in fellowship (“4 Reasons the Bible Calls Us to Community”). During Jesus’s prayer before his betrayal, he prays specifically for the unity of the people. He refers to the impact that this oneness will make on the effect people will have for the Kingdom of God, as he prays, “the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (*English Standard Version*, Luke 17.20-23) because of the unity in the people. Our society should be a reflection of this as people thrive within community as God

intended. The pursuit of Social justice should include the pursuit of society in the way God planned because only then can true justice occur.

Despite the obvious steps the government in America has taken, the ability to get everyone involved is difficult. People become stuck in their prejudices. Bryan Stevenson recounts his life and journey in becoming the lawyer he is now in his book *Just Mercy*. Stevenson defends an African American man, Walter McMillian, on death row for the murder of a young white woman that McMillian very blatantly did not commit. However, in Alabama in the 1980's, the desire for the murderer to be caught, and the discrimination and hatred, which filled the cities, caused the citizens to so easily believe the lies that it was Walter McMillian. If Walter had just been white, he would not have spent six years on death row. Throughout his encounters, Stevenson shares of the inequalities in the criminal justice system, specifically Alabama, dealing with the death penalty and children being incarcerated (Stevenson).

Even though the surface problem as to why Walter was on death row was because of the court system, the root of the problem was due to the society in which he was living. As Stevenson pursues changing the court systems with how children are imprisoned, death penalties are so easily distributed, mass incarceration occurs, and overall racial injustices through Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), he is striving towards a revolutionized society. But, until people are on his side, he will never get the changed law, the jury verdict to free an innocent man, or the desire of the people to restore community to the way it should look. Stevenson works towards defending the people who are being wrongfully prosecuted not just for crimes they are accused of but also based on their status in society. He realizes what this does to a community:

We are all implicated when we allow other people to be mistreated. An absence of compassion can corrupt the decency of a community, a state, a nation. Fear and anger can make us vindictive and abusive, unjust and unfair, until we all suffer from the absence of mercy and we condemn ourselves as much as we victimize others (Stevenson, 18).

No matter where one lives, the mistreatment of people leads to injustices and the downfall of communities. The compassion that Stevenson mentions leads us to love and care for each individual, and regardless if one is a believer in Christianity or citizen of the United States, compassion restricts the hatred that leads to many injustices (Stevenson).

The second part of the term, social justice, is the one which majority of the people tend to focus on: justice. What is justice? The Cambridge Dictionary states that the term justice means, “the condition of being morally correct or fair” (*Cambridge Dictionary*). There are court systems and laws in nearly every country, and in the United States a judicial branch, to determine the laws and criminal justice system. With the community aspect of Social Justice, it creates the humanitarian viewpoint; however, there is the government and laws which have to be worked through. In the same way as Justice, who/what sets the standard for justice and the laws created?

As stated, in America, there is the judicial branch of the government who determines laws, ruled by the Supreme Court, filing down to local law enforcement and lawyers. As a democratic government, the people of the United States elect the higher-ranking officials making these decisions, and attorneys and police officers have to go through schooling and training to be hired. Unfortunately, corruption can be found. In the instance mentioned with Walter McMillian, the Sheriff and attorneys on the State side were corrupt. Any place humans are involved, there is

always the possibility of human error, but purposefully doing your duty wrongfully and making a mistake are two different things.

The only true judge of Justice is God. He determines our morals and gives the standard of living. Without God, there is no image of perfection to base the law upon. For us though, it is an unachievable goal (*English Standard Version*, James 2.10). However, God is the God of mercy, claiming that mercy must also be carried into the prosecution of the law “for judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy... mercy triumphs over judgment” (*English Standard Version*, James 2.13). He knows we will fail at obeying the law one hundred percent. Judges, attorneys, and officers also know that not everyone is going to follow the law perfectly, explaining pleas, lowered sentences, chances for parole, etc. This does not mean that justice should not be pursued; in fact, God desires for Christians to pursue justice, both the prosecution and the defense. He is a Just God and a loving God.

There are several verses in the Bible that highlight Justice, which God tells his people to pursue. For example, Isaiah 1:17 declares, “learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow,” (*New International Version*) portraying the Christian’s heart should be in the pursuit of justice not separated from it. Today, many believe, as Christians, they should distance themselves from the problems in society and focus just on sharing the gospel with people. However, part of God’s commandments is to love one’s neighbor and care for the world, including the injustices in the world (Pillay). How can Christians look like Jesus if we exclude ourselves to the outside of society, completely unlike Jesus?

Social Justice looks different for everyone, and the crazy thing about it is that it can look different. It is not confined to a specific job. For Matthew Desmond, his pursuit of justice began with two years of living in Milwaukee with those below the poverty, tracking down the root of housing insecurity. Now, he is helping research and support organizations that rid people of their housing problem. He saw the problem: people living without a house with barely a chance at a home, and he decided to pursue fixing this issue. He did not just write them off as another lost cause to not be associated with but chose to dig deeper and walk alongside of them due to the love of justice and love of people he has (Desmond).

For The CALL in Clark County, they are answering God's calling to help the modern-day orphans here in Arkansas, or foster and adopted children. Training and assisting families, The CALL mobilizes Christians to be able to love the parentless. They help make a broken situation and system a little less frightening and intimidating for the children going through the troubled-times (*The CALL*). As well, the Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center walks through the therapy and trial stage with the family and child to make it not so difficult for the child (*Percy and Donna Malone Child Safety Center*).

These examples of people pursuing social justice have multiple things in common, but the most important is the common trait is the care for each individual person achieving. It was the people typically looked over, the ones who need an extra hand: the wrongfully accused, the poor, the fatherless, the abused. Advocating is not top priority; care and passion for the people you are helping is. Advocating, changes of laws, influence, and achievement all sprout out of the passion one has for social justice. It isn't a foreign concept or rocket science, but rather, the simple task of building humanity together through love and commitment to the truth.

Combining social and justice, you get the pursuit of something better than yourself, of the ability to better the community, to better someone's life forever. People so often get stuck in this trap of poverty, gangs, and crime because that is all they know but that is also all they are limited to. A parent's life will influence the child's, carrying on the tradition of drugs or crime. It is almost as if it is an identity they become stuck with, struggling to break free (Solomon). The problems get passed on to children, which is a fear for a lot of parents, but even if they try their hardest to guard their children, it is difficult and nearly impossible.

Throughout his two years in Milwaukee, Desmond talks about a mother trying to find places to live away from the gangs, violence, and drugs that she had grown up in, not wanting her children to be influenced by the same thing. However, the only homes that should could afford on her monthly stipend and without landlords turning her away due to her color and children were in these neighborhoods - the one place she was avoiding. It was an endless cycle for her family, that she could not escape without outside help. Her past eviction prevented her from many homes even though the scenario was understandable. She was denied the chance to try again and give her children a better life without outside help because she was caught in the regulations set in place (Desmond).

This does not mean that social justice is getting rid of all the regulations, but rather, it is coming alongside those struggling and figuring out what truly helps them. The housing insecurity crisis America is facing is due to the fact that the regulations now are not working. Social justice is combining the passion and love one has for people to better their life with the desire to see society overall grow.

Social justice helps everyone but tends to focus more on the ones that everyone else looks over as mentioned earlier. It is not a search for equality but rather equity. If you treat everyone the same, the same social separations and prejudices will still be present just at a higher social level. Some people in life need more help than others at the current stage in life they are in; equity is being able to offer that same assistance to everyone without discrimination in order to get everyone to achieve. It is the attempt to get everyone to the same “playing field” not so we can all live the exact same life, but in order for us to be able to rid the world of the injustices we live among.

Once again, I believe social justice is the pursuit of equity in the community and society as a whole, working to fix laws, or other reasons, which cause individuals to become stuck in the problems they face, while caring about each individual. My view of social justice has indeed expanded since I came to Ouachita, but I still believe it is as simple as just helping people. Find your passion where injustices are, and love on the people there. Simply caring about someone when other people look the other direction gives them a boost in the right direction.

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