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Social Justice Explained

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Dr. Houser

Intro to Social Justice

13 December 2019

Social Justice Explained

When one looks around and sees people sleeping on park benches, a family of five packed into a small run-down two-bedroom trailer, eviction notices on doors, and a smart young man sent to jail for selling drugs, he asks “where is justice?”. He might think this world is hopeless. While social injustice is prevalent, there are people working towards social justice by changing the broken systems within society. Social justice isn’t just an ideology like some people believe. It is a methodology. Social justice is changing the systems within society that lead us to devalue human beings.

Christians have a unique view of social justice. Justice means to get what one deserves. The Bible explains in Genesis 1:26-28 that God created man in his image. Being image-bearers, all human beings have inherent value. Something valuable deserves to be treated with respect. God demonstrated this by spending more time creating humans. He didn’t just speak them into existence. He molded them. He formed them. He took the time to make them special. Therefore, Christians should help all people to see that they are valuable by ensuring they have access to the basics of human survival. People should be able to access food, clothing, water, and shelter at all times. While this can’t come to fruition currently because this world can’t be perfect, people can still work towards this goal. Small steps taken by many people can make an impact and make the world a better place. Social justice requires actions, not just words.

Social justice involves changing systems because social injustice is rooted in social constructs. Being set up this way, social injustice isn't always obvious. Some struggle to see all of the issues because injustice isn't in their faces. To create social justice, those with perspective must help others to see the problems in society and why they need to be changed.

People need to physically see the problem. The saying "out of sight, out of mind" is in fact quite accurate. In Conway, Arkansas, for a time, people were not allowed to stand on street corners asking for money. Therefore, many of the citizens were unaware of how large the homeless population was. A few years ago, the laws changed. People are now allowed to panhandle. As soon as this change occurred, citizens started asking the city officials to build a homeless shelter. Once they could see the need, they wanted to act. This idea would not have come about if people had not been able to see the issue with their own eyes. It is one thing to hear about an issue, but another thing to see it. Scientists have proven that visual memories last longer than auditory ones.¹ Therefore, social justice work requires one to help others to see the problems within society.

This idea can also be seen in Arkadelphia. Compared to Conway, the needs in Arkadelphia are more obvious. Over the past semester, I have been helping out at Lighthouse Ministries. When I first toured the facilities, I was amazed by how many items they had. I had never seen a ministry so well stocked with clothing. After spending time in Arkadelphia I realized that people were so willing to give because the need can be clearly seen. Arkadelphia doesn't try to hide its poverty. When one drives around the town it is clear that many people in the area are struggling to get by. While this might not make the town look attractive to most, at

¹ Cohen, Michael A., Todd S. Horowitz, and Jeremy M. Wolfe. "Auditory Recognition Memory Is Inferior to Visual Recognition Memory." PNAS. National Academy of Sciences, April 7, 2009. <https://www.pnas.org/content/106/14/6008>.

least the view is honest. Those who are well-off in the city can't avoid driving by at least a few run-down houses every day. Therefore, they are continually reminded that they need to be helping out their neighbors. The Christians are reminded in a special way that they need to be helping out their brothers and sisters in Christ.

While one needs to understand why social justice work has to be done, he also needs to know how it can be done. Social justice requires money. Currently, housing insecurity is a major issue in the United States. It leaves many people on the streets or living in other conditions that are not fit for human beings. Therefore, the housing system needs to be changed. While federal rental assistance, only the poorest of the poor qualify for this type of aid. To qualify for a housing voucher, one must spend about eighty percent of her income on housing.² Those who are spending seventy percent of their income on housing aren't in a much better situation. Therefore, housing vouchers should be available to more people. They are very effective in changing a family's quality of life.

Currently, housing vouchers allow families to "spend 30 percent of their income on rent instead of the usual 80."³ These programs have proven to be successful. They allow families to spend an adequate amount on groceries so children can get the proper nutrients they need. When families spend less on housing, they are also less likely to move around. Overall, the program gives families stability. This is what all human beings need to live up to their full potential.

To get funds to help expand housing vouchers, social justice organizations could work along with government agencies and the wealthy. Social Justice agencies could take the wealthy

² McCormack, J. W. "Housing Vouchers Would Change the Face of Poverty." Vice. Vice, April 18, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yp7ppj/housing-vouchers-would-change-the-face-of-poverty.

³ Desmond, Matthew. "Housing Vouchers Would Change the Face of Poverty." Vice. Vice, April 18, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/yp7ppj/housing-vouchers-would-change-the-face-of-poverty.

through the poorest parts of their town and explain to them what a typical day looks like for people who live there. After seeing and hearing about these tragedies of everyday life, the social justice worker could see what the wealthy families would be willing to give. For those who are really interested in helping, they could create a partnership between the wealthy family and one of the struggling families. They could invest not just financially but also with their time.

The housing crisis is one issue that needs funds, but it isn't the only one. Non-profit legal organizations also need to be funded to help the impoverished with legal issues. Just Mercy by Bryan Stevenson points out that those convicted of crimes are disproportionately in minority ethnic groups. Those in the minority are also more likely to be in poverty.⁴ Therefore, many of those accused of crimes do not have access to the best lawyers. They have to go into court with little hope of being able to defend themselves. The odds are not in their favor. This is another broken system within society. It is not fair for the rich to have access to wonderful lawyers while the poor don't have the opportunity to pick out their lawyers. People like Bryan Stevenson are trying to change this. He runs a non-profit that offers legal assistance to those who cannot afford to find their own lawyers. He works very hard to make sure that the poor get the best legal assistance. By having a legal system that benefits the rich, the judicial branch is not providing justice. Once again, people can help fund justice programs like this by giving financially.

As I mentioned earlier, people are made in the image of God. This doesn't just make people valuable. It also means that people are made with a deep desire for community. God being three-in-one is the perfect community. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all work together efficiently with the same goal. They all love each other and work together to love their creation.

⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation. "Poverty Rate by Race/Ethnicity." The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. WordPress, December 4, 2019. [https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel={\"colId\":\"Location\",\"sort\":\"asc\"}](https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/poverty-rate-by-raceethnicity/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel={\).

Humans were created reflecting this, creating in them a need for fellowship. Therefore, social justice can be seen through people coming together as a community.

One of the most important ways to seek justice is by giving time. For one to feel valued, he needs someone to invest in him. Those who live in poverty or are part of minorities, often are made to feel like they are less important in society. When Kristin Walker came to talk to the class about Urban Promise, she explained that those deprived of justice are hungry for God's love. As I have learned from How People Grow by Cloud and Townsend, the best way for people to feel God's love is through other people. Programs like Urban Promise do a great job at this. They work with children and teens during the summer in a camp-style environment. They do fun activities with them and teach them life skills, but most importantly, they build strong relationships with the campers. The staffers and campers open up to one another and share their stories. The staffers are able to give the campers advice and explain to them how they were able to make through hard times with God's strength. They can help the campers understand that they are loved. By giving their time, the staffers remind the students that they matter.

It is amazing what feeling loved can do for a person. One of the reasons people don't volunteer in their communities is because they feel like the people they are helping are not grateful. When I have volunteered at a soup kitchen that has a new group of people volunteering every week, about half of the people seem ungrateful for the food. However, when I have helped out at Lighthouse Ministries, all the people that have come in have been very grateful. They always leave with smiles on their faces even though the reality on the other side of the door is painful. I believe this has to do with the fact that they know the workers. When they come in, Mrs. Debbie can call them by name. She knows their stories. She truly cares about them. Because she is consistently there, they know she loves them. At places with heavy volunteer

turnover, people aren't being invested in. Groups are just coming a few times a year to get community service hours or to feel better about themselves. They aren't coming for the people. If they were coming for the people, they would be there often. Therefore, social justice requires one to dedicate time to a few people who need help. One doesn't have to volunteer at a non-profit to do this. It could simply mean volunteering to babysit for a single mother down the street who works three jobs. It could mean tutoring a fellow student who works all the time because his parents can't help him financially. There are many ways one can give his time and invest in people. Investing in people shows that one loves them enough to see their humanity.

People want to know that they are loved. Feeling loved helps motivate people to live. It reminds them that they matter enough for someone else to care about them. It can motivate them to work harder. I had a friend in high school who gave up on his schoolwork because he felt like his mother didn't love him. He found no comfort when he went home, so he felt like he had no purpose. When I explained to him that I loved him and that God did as well, he started working hard again. He was even able to finish high school with an associate's degree.

The opposite of love is selfishness. Love gives. Selfishness keeps. American culture has become very selfish. This can be seen through the American dream. The idea of the American dream has been a great motivation for people in society. However, for others, it has brought hardship. As society has modernized, this dream has gone from the idea of being financially comfortable to one who has more than he could ever need. The idea of the American dream can push Americans to be overly focused on themselves. They believe that they have to be successful no matter the cost. For them to reach the goal, they have to knock down anything that could get in their way. This kind of living creates a dangerous social environment. It ignores the value of others. It causes one to be so focused on himself that he forgets that other people should have to

right to eat a meal every day and have a roof over their heads. Americans need to change the ideal of success. Being successful should not mean that one has an abundance of material goods. While these things can make one famous, they aren't fulfilling, and they don't have a lasting positive impact. The new idea of success should be one who lives simply, without an abundance. While it is not wrong to work hard and earn a large salary, one should be using the excess to help those in need. No one needs five cars, but people need shelter. No one needs two personal jets but people need food. No one needs one hundred pairs of shoes but everyone needs some clothes. Therefore, the American dream should be shifted to the idea of simple living and putting others first.

Some believe that social justice is just an idea that cannot come to life. During the first few weeks of my Social Justice course, I believed that Social Justice was just an ideology that could not be fully seen in this world. At the time, I was being bombarded by many different sources that were all telling how horrible the world is. They were bringing to light new evils I had never thought about or known existed. I was downtrodden, believing that the world was fallen and could never be restored to peace. However, as I learned more, my view changed.

I was trying to change all of society. This is impossible. Social Justice will happen in the way that nations will hear the gospel. Many people have to be working to make small changes. One person cannot do it alone. It takes the small changes adding up to change society as a whole. People can be easily discouraged in social justice work because there is not always clear evidence that what one is doing is helping. However, one never knows how his words or actions are going to affect someone later on. One can help a person be more open-minded by the way he talks and thinks. This can lead that person to be even more open to later experiences. As time goes on, he may eventually change his mind. Change is a process, so people have to remember it

takes time. This is also like sharing the gospel with a person. One may not see immediate fruit, but it can get the person thinking. In a few weeks, months, or years, they may finally grasp the concept of God's love and choose to begin a relationship with him. With this outlook, social justice work can be hopeful. Small steps over time can lead to big change.

While the world will not ever be perfect, Christians should be working to make it better. This is what Jesus did. He loved people and reminded them that they mattered. He changed broken systems in society and even flipped tables to make his point. Therefore, Christians should be living out social justice as a methodology. They should be giving financially when they can. They should also be giving their time and investing in people. This is how people come to know Jesus. They need to have their basic needs met and then they need to know that God loves them. When more people come to Christ, more people start working to change the systems in society that lead us to devalue human beings because they become more like Jesus.

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