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Elise Nelson

Intro to Social Justice

Personal Manifesto

December 11, 2018

If God's Heart Is for Justice, Mine Should Be Too: A Personal Manifesto

Struggle. Contradictions. Confusion. Hypocrisy. Frustration. Truth. Gray areas. All of these are words that would describe my thoughts and feelings throughout the semester I originally wrote this personal manifesto in the fall of 2018. I was coming back to university from having been abroad for a semester and was experiencing pretty intense culture shock. Many of the things that I learned or was made aware of about the world primarily through my classes that semester rocked my world. Add reverse culture shock to it, and one would see why this was a difficult yet important season of my life. I went into that semester knowing that my new Social Justice major was going to be difficult. I knew there would be things that I would agree with and things that would go against all that I have ever known (primarily politically). I understood that for me to study this subject, I was going to have to sacrifice a lot of pride, bias, and polarized, ignorant thoughts. I was ready to learn more about poverty, violence, injustice, and ways that both I and the government could help people. I was ready to learn how to make a difference in this world that God gave us. Up to this point in my life, I had made my faith my own; I did not have my parents' faith anymore, but my own. Jesus had completely changed my life and my heart. He had given me His heart for the nations, for cultures, and for the people He created. However, things were beginning not to add up. Some of the political beliefs that are typically associated with the political party that my family identified with did not seem overly Christian, yet members of my family had outspoken support of some of these ideologies. As confusing as this was to me at first, I eventually learned to connect the political beliefs I was raised with, the

political beliefs on the other side of the argument, and biblical principles. I will explain this in greater detail later in this manifesto.

So, I had my own faith, yet, how could I make my own opinions about things going on in the world? At my house, I only heard one side of the story. There was no looking at the other side to see their perspective; that would be pointless right? Things my parents say made sense to me, however other things I learned about on the other side of the coin did too. I did not feel like I could ever figure out what the truth was because I heard so many different voices. If I mentioned having a certain view on an issue that was different than my family's view, it was total taboo to them, like I was being brainwashed by the media and my professors. Sometimes, it felt like I did not have the right to have my own political opinions unless they went along with what my family thought. At the same time, sometimes within the major, at least in the beginning of the semester, I felt like a wolf in sheep's clothing during class. If someone said something that was complete opposite from what my family believed, I would sit there silent with my pride hurting. This did help me see one thing though: I began to realize that my political views were completely based on what my parents, grandparents, and culture said and believed. They are entitled to their views; everyone is. What they believe in, they believe in for a reason. And for a time, those views made sense to me too, though I did not take the time to listen to the other side. Once I did actually listen to the other side, some of these arguments made sense as well. Even still, both sides were more polarized than I was comfortable with, and I found difficulty coming up with my own conclusions. It was often easy for me to get bogged down in all that was wrong with the world, be upset about everything, and angrily rant to my roommate about issues in the world that no one else seemed to be aware of or care about. I wanted to have a middle view; but how was I supposed to do this when so many pressures around me felt like I had to think in one of the

extremes? Finally, I realized that I should probably see what God says about all of this in His Word. What did God think about injustices happening in our world? What did He think about politics and current issues?

I came to the conclusion that God does indeed care about social issues. I think that too often I had been separating what God says about His heart for the nations from what God says about His heart for justice. That being said, the most important thing is that His Name is exalted among the nations as He frees the captives and brings justice. It had gotten so political for me that I forgot what my role is as a believer and follower of Jesus Christ. It was quite difficult for me to make a decision about what my role is in all of this. I decided that I will focus this manifesto on God's heart for justice, what He thinks about all that happens in the world, and why His heart for the nations and His heart for justice are both components of His character. If they are part of His character, they should be part of mine too.

The more I think about what I think social justice is, the harder it is to separate it from God. Genesis 1:27 says that people are made in the image of God. What does that mean? It means that we were made as creative beings with value, the ability to make decisions, and the ability to comprehend and know God. He gave us all a brain to be able to understand the world around us. Being created in the God's image gives all humans the greatest amount of dignity we could ever get. Not only did He create us to be like Him, but He created us all different. God created different cultures. Let me say that again- God created different cultures. He created language. He created skin color, eye color, and hair color. Though humans may all be totally different on the outside, we all have hearts, veins, lungs, brains. We each have the imprint of God on our lives because He created us. Injustice occurs when humans are not treated with the dignity that they are worthy of no matter whom they are, where they come from, or even what

they have done. God hates when people that He created are treated with little or no value.

Without the understanding of God creating people in His image, I personally cannot understand why a person would see everyone as equal, other than having common morality. But where does morality itself come from? What even is morality?¹ Again, I cannot separate these things from God. If all are made in God's image, why do people treat each other like they are not? What happened after creation that made everyone evil? When Satan came to the garden to try to get Adam and Eve to sin, he told them that if they ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would be like God. They would understand that life is not what it seemed, and they can choose evil things. So, when they sinned, it completely separated humans from God because of their disobedience. With no connection to God, humans tried to live by their own judgements, which always fall short. This is when injustice happens; when people are people. We see just a few chapters after Adam and Eve sinned that without God, there was murder and exploitation of women. Humans are inherently evil. If when they were separated from God, there was no righteousness or uprightness, that must mean that those are both characteristics of God.² However evil man may be, after they sinned, God did not leave them to live on their own and then die. He had compassion on them. In the same chapter that humans fell short, God gave a promise of a Restorer; He promised that He would bridge the gap between Himself and humans again one day.³

¹ I will not explicitly answer these questions here; that is for another paper for another class.

² "The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He," Deuteronomy 32:4 NASB.

³ Genesis 3.

If I am going to respond in injustice the way that God does, how does He? One way is through compassion. “Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; yes, our God is compassionate. The Lord preserves the simple; I was brought low, and He saved me.”⁴ In Matthew, Jesus goes to a secluded place to be with God after He hears of the murder of His cousin John. People follow Him, and “He saw a large crowd, and felt compassion for them and healed their sick.”⁵ In Deuteronomy, Moses is prophesying about the disobedience and exile of the Jews. He says, “then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.”⁶ Another way God responds to justice is with wrath. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”⁷ In many places in the Old Testament, God’s wrath occurred when evil and sin took place. He hates when unrighteousness and injustice occur; it goes against His own character. For example, in Genesis, we see the story of Tamar, the daughter-in-law of Judah. Her first husband was wicked, so God struck him down. His brother used her body, among other things, so God struck him down too.^{8 9} If God hates injustice and unrighteousness, I should too. Another way that God responds to injustice in the world is through rescue. “O Lord, You have heard the desire of the humble; You will strengthen their heart, You will incline Your ear to vindicate the orphan and the oppressed,

⁴ Psalm 116:5-6.

⁵ Matthew 14:14 NASB.

⁶ Deuteronomy 30:3 NASB.

⁷ Romans 1:18 NASB.

⁸ As the brother of the man who died, it was his job to take on his brother’s widow to continue his brother’s name. However, knowing that the child would not be his, he basically slept with her, but “wasted his seed on the ground in order not to give offspring to his brother.” I will leave that to the reader’s interpretation.

⁹ See Genesis 38:6-10.

so that man who is of the earth will no longer cause terror.”¹⁰ When God’s own people were in slavery in Egypt, He rescued them from the hands of the Egyptians. He told Moses to tell the Israelites, “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgements.”¹¹ Even in Isaiah, when the people were neglecting social justice issues, God spoke through Isaiah saying, “Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”¹² God seeks to rescue those in bondage. In fact, He did the ultimate rescue when He sent Jesus to be the propitiation for our sins. There was separation between God and man, and sin was keeping man in bondage. Man is evil; God is Just and Perfect. We could never live up to God’s character on our own; nor could we pay the debt we owed, so God did it Himself. That is the ultimate rescue. He not only came to pay for our sins, but also to “proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.”¹³ Jesus brings restoration, redemption, and healing. He brings righteousness and light. Humans get to have this as a gift as well.¹⁴

¹⁰ Psalm 10: 17-18 NASB.

¹¹ Exodus 6:6 NASB.

¹² Isaiah 58:6-7 NASB.

¹³ Luke 4:15 NASB.

¹⁴ See Romans 5.

If God is compassionate, angry at injustice, and provides rescue, I should seek these things as well. Isaiah implores the people of Israel to “learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow,” because that is what God’s heart longs for.¹⁵ I do not do these things simply because I “should,” but instead as I long for the complete restoration and return of Jesus, He calls me to be a light in this world, shining His light on darkness. When Jesus returns, He will take away the darkness and evil.¹⁶ So, fighting for that on earth now is of utmost importance because it is part of taking the Gospel to the world. Because of what Jesus did for us, for whom He is, and for what He will do one day, the lives of believers have been completely changed. When lives are changed, we want to tell the world. In fact, Jesus commands us to do so.¹⁷ God’s heart from the beginning of time has been about the nations knowing who He is because He is the only One that brings healing, reconciliation, and justice.

What does all of this have to do with what I think social justice is? God seems to think that it is reconciliation, restoration, fighting for the marginalized, rescuing those in bondage, speaking out for people who have had injustices done to them, and even living in a way that glorifies Him. What implications does this have for me right now? I think it means taking the time to try to understand why people are in the situations they are in and why they make the decisions that they do. Andrew Solomon does a good job of this in his book *Far from the Tree*, as he explores the parent-child relationships of those who have some form of condition that potentially restricts them in their lives.¹⁸ He approaches these people in a way that is an attempt

¹⁵ Isaiah 1:17 NASB.

¹⁶ See Revelation 21:1-8

¹⁷ See Matthew 28:18-19.

¹⁸ Conditions such as transgender-ness, deafness, rape, schizophrenia, etc.

to understand and sympathize with what they were feeling and going through.¹⁹ I should attempt to understand why people are the way they are regardless of if I agree or disagree with their situation or choices. I should respond with compassion to those people no matter whom they are. Another way that I should respond is that I too should be angry and disturbed about injustices in the world. It is important to remember that the struggle “is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”²⁰ That being said, fighting for social justice is directly fighting against Satan and for God. Jesus stated, “the thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”²¹ Knowing that Satan only wants to destroy the wholeness that God brings is that main thing that leads to righteous anger against injustice in the world. Also, social justice issues are not something to throw loose change at; they are something that is worth devoting one’s whole life to, whatever that may look like. In school, that may mean making decisions on what I buy based on fair-trade. It could mean buying gifts for people that were made by artisans or even not driving my car as much so as to help the environment. It could also mean raising awareness and advocating for certain issues via word of mouth or social media, as long as the situation and people being advocated for are actually understood, as pointed out in Alex De Waal’s book *Advocacy in Conflict*.²² Being active in the fight against different injustices in the world is so important.

¹⁹ Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree*, (New York: Scribner, 2012).

²⁰ Ephesians 6:12 NASB.

²¹ John 10:10 NASB.

²² Alex De Waal, *Advocacy in Conflict*, (London: Zed Books, 2015).

One of the main things that I think I have learned this semester, even through doing this study, is that if people continue to be so extremely polarized with their political views, change is not going to happen, or at least not quickly. When the Southern American Church will not step up and take action against social justice issues just because they sound “liberal”, they are failing to live out the full Gospel. The other extreme I think would be neglecting the importance of sharing the Gospel, feeding spiritual needs while helping with physical needs.²³ These two sides of the spectrum must work together in fighting injustice in the world today. Gerald Pillay, when addressing the political polarization in an article, states that “both these aspects of Christian faith belong together. Social justice and spirituality, contextual relevance and biblical authority. They cannot be separated without distorting the Christian message.”²⁴ Unity is imperative to fighting injustice; Jesus Himself prayed for unity among believers.²⁵ That being said, I need to make decisions about what I believe about certain issues, yet I do not need to get angry when people disagree with the way to go about social justice. I also do not need to get angry when people, such as my dad or little brother, do not understand why I care so much about these things or when they tell me that certain issues do not actually exist. I need to treat them with grace, showing God’s character in the way I respond even to them. If we are going to become united to fight against Satan and injustice, it starts with me and my attitude. To conclude, social justice is fighting for reconciliation, for healing, for those who cannot fight for themselves no matter whom they are; it is fighting against evil, violence, manipulation, bondage. Social Justice is fighting for what is on God’s heart: His glory among the nations. Fighting for these things

²³ If we feed someone’s physical needs, but do not even tell them about the God that loves them, gave Himself for them, and provides healing and redemption, our work was ultimately in vain.

²⁴ Gerald Pillay, *Working for Justice*, <https://www.otago.ac.nz/chaplain/resources/otago017073.html>.

²⁵ See John 17:22-23.

reveals God's own character. Though my semester has been very hard for multiple reasons, I can confidently say that God has opened my eyes so much to the world around me and the injustices that occur. There are things that my parents believe that I still do and things that I believe that they definitely do not, and that is okay. As long as I am fighting to bring God's Kingdom here on earth, I know that these differences will not matter in the long run.

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