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Taking the Blinders Off

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Social Justice

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Taking the Blinders Off

“In the beginning there was only a small amount of injustice abroad in the world, but everyone who came afterwards added their portion, always thinking it was very small and unimportant, and look where we have ended up today.”

-Paulo Coelho, The Devil and Miss Prym

Defining the phrase “Social Justice” is itself far from complex and can mean many different things to many people. Going into this Social Justice class, I wasn’t prepared to see the world for how it is and all of the injustice that comes with it. I started this personal manifesto off with a quote from Paulo Coelho, because what he says is significant to how our generation will thrive justly in the coming years. To me, social justice means equal opportunity to all.

Opportunity to be loved for who they are and be able to work and provide for their family, not based on their race, gender, or disability... etc. As complicated as it is, it is in the same way, very simple. I had the pleasure of reading a few books in this class and with those, the Bible, and my own past experiences, I have formed a personal view of what social justice means to me.

First, I would like to share a history of mission trip experiences I had that opened my eyes to a more global issue rather than just a country problem. Don’t get me wrong, there are plenty of needs in America, but it took me leaving the comfort of my bed to understand just how bad it is in some places. The Lord laid it on my heart when I was a senior in high school to be an out-of-the-country missionary. I thought that was going to be for the rest of my life. I wanted to

help people as best I could and be a light to those who don't get to be loved. So, I packed my 50-pound backpack and headed to South Africa with a bunch of strangers I had never met. I was first in Johannesburg, SA. My time there was four beautiful weeks short. We learned the history of the squatter camps and the people that reside in them. The injustice I saw was unfathomable. It had me in tears as I went to sleep most nights. Families from most of Southern Africa were coming to find jobs only to find out that everyone is looking for a job and their chances are pretty low. We, as a team, did door-to-door outreach: helping moms hand-wash clothes, playing with their kids, and hearing every story of determination to survive. We were there to love them for who they were despite their circumstances. It was weird to them, seeing white people come into the camps just to love them. When you take away privilege, discrimination, and hate, you are left with a great opportunity to pour into whoever is around.

My next month, I traveled to Swaziland. Oh, how that place has my heart. I got to see the community there. The kind of fellowship you get when, after church, you never want to leave because of the community that knows, loves, and *wants* you. One time, when I was playing a rough and tiring game with the kids, I had to stop because that African sun was getting to me. I made my way over to my water bottle so I could hydrate and catch my breath. This little girl that was too young to play with us came over to me, grabbed my water bottle, and poured the water into her hands. She brushed my hair out of the way and started rubbing her cold and wet hands across the back of my neck. It was in that moment I realized that I was my best self—being there for her and her being there for me. A lot of times, young missionaries go on the field with the mindset of being the hero. Yes! You can be a hero. But keep in mind that they can be a hero for you too.

I saw the injustice in both of those places and then coming home due to Covid-19 and seeing that in America, it's not that different. Yes, we have the luxury cars, proper clothing, and good education. But we still murder. We still are racist. We don't treat people as if we are all human. This leads to my second point. Christ asks us to love one another and in doing so, most injustices would be solved. The Bible actually makes social justice a mandate of faith and a fundamental expression of Christian disciples. As God is love and just, so we are called to do justice and live in love. This is a biblical justice that cannot even happen without Jesus. There is no difference between a biblical justice and a social justice.

Justice in its simplest form is to set things right. But how do we know what is right? Better question, who defines "right"?

"The Rock, His work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he." Deuteronomy 32:4

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you." Psalm 89:14

As followers of Christ, it is simple. Where we get our definition of justice is imparted to us by who God is. Pursuing biblical justice means we follow God's path to make correct that which is not, we look to the Bible to know and define what "right" is. Jesus lived a sinless and 100% perfect life and died a sacrificial death. He rose from the grave to make right what was wrong. It is because of that we can be justified and made right with God. Jesus shows us in the New Testament how to love people of all kinds with compassion. Jesus pursued justice. Physically and spiritually, He helped those in need. In John 8, Jesus cared for the woman caught in adultery and in Matthew 8, he healed a leper. These are just a few examples out of many in the New Testament.

Furthermore, is social justice any different? We are called to cry out against unbalanced scales of justice, unequal justice under the law, and defend the poor, weak and powerless. There is social and biblical justice, but justice itself is the same. The Bible talks about the Parable of the Talents. One could argue that God does not measure injustice in this way. In fact, he increases the disparity between the lazy servant and the hard-working one. Because that *is* justice and should not be confused with mercy. Justice is justice, social or otherwise. They do not compete with or cancel each other out. There can be, however, injustice in the distribution of wealth, power, and privilege. In today's society, we see a lot of injustice when distributing anything that makes you seen as higher. It is hard to draw a line between who deserves what.

As the question of drawing a line between just and unjust arose before even taking this course, I learned in this class some examples of when we can draw lines or when situations are just too gray to determine justice. First, I will be talking about the first book that we read, *Evicted* by Matthew Desmond. Then, I will go into forming identity with the book *Far from the Tree* by Andrew Solomon. Finally, I will discuss the second to last book we were assigned to read, *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. In all three of these books, we see examples of those gray areas when we can call things just or unjust—keeping in mind that we, as Christians, get our definition of justice by who God is in character.

Matthew Desmond writes his book *Evicted* based off of eight different families struggling to survive based off of unfortunate financial circumstances. In summary, the main character that is mentioned throughout the book is Sherenna. She was a teacher before becoming a landlord and really wanted to make a difference in Milwaukee. Throughout the book, one could have mixed feelings for her because she is forced to be harsh on a lot of tenants. One specific tenant I want to focus on is Lamar. He was a Vietnam war veteran and had to have both of his legs amputated.

He was raising his two sons, Luke and Eddy, along with a few other boys he took under his wing because they loved to hang out with his sons after school. He and his sons were living in an apartment with Sherenna as their landlord. Lamar had to use every cent of his disability check to pay for rent, food, and anything the boys needed while they were in school. One month, he was behind on his rent. Sherenna gave him the opportunity to work off his rent by painting one of the apartments a family had just moved out of. He and his boys did a really bad paint job and in doing so, Sherenna thought it right to not give him the credit. Despite his efforts, he couldn't get the job done and he was really struggling to pay from then on. He also couldn't find a job to make it up. In the end, along with Sherenna's repeated threats to evict him, he finally left when they notified him that the building was going to be bulldozed.

In this circumstance, Lamar had a disability from serving our country and is still suffering in America. Regardless of his situation, he should have been offered either more money, especially for having minors to raise, and offered a job to be able to raise those children. It is not justice that Lamar is unable to work and be behind on his rent uncontrollably and that his sons have to suffer. For what? Nothing. One could perceive Lamar as a man who doesn't work, therefore shouldn't have the same wages. But he is not the same as normal people due to his disability; therefore, he should have higher opportunity for work so he is able to provide for his family. That is justice.

Second, I want to discuss *Far from the Tree*, written by Andrew Solomon. This book was a strong love/hate book for me. I have never read a book before that I respect yet disrespect at the same time in my life. Solomon is an activist in the area of LGBTQ rights. He is the founder of Solomon Research Fellowships in LGBT Studies at Yale University, and Special Advisor on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Mental Health at the Yale School of Psychiatry. By

just the sound of this, how could one believe I would listen to a word he says as a believer in Christ? His research isn't one-hundred percent accurate. He is Jewish and therefore does not believe Jesus is our Savior and taught true teachings. He cannot believe in the same justice I was talking about in the beginning. He also researched approximately six-hundred different people with different disabilities to understand the difference between horizontal and vertical relationships between a child and their parent. Yet, he only chose to write about the people with severe disabilities or awful circumstances. What about the people who are borderline disabled? For example, someone who has been raped but didn't get pregnant. Solomon talks about a woman in his chapter, "Rape", where her story is really sad because she struggles to love the child she has and personally struggles mentally with the fact that her child is a product of rape. I mean, of course, that is so sad and is extremely unjustified in all cases. But what about the person who was raped and had to move on with their life because they were afraid no one would listen, or no one would care? They are probably thinking, "Oh, this happens to everyone." Or "I guess I shouldn't have worn a dress that night." Where is the justice for that person?

To the point, Solomon didn't do a good job on his research when he had plenty of opportunity to include victims who are most relatable. I feel like readers could better understand the world rather than read chapter to chapter about the saddest stories full of hate and lack of love. But I would, of course, love to explain why I also love this book. While he didn't do well including the borderline victims of injustice, in the same way, he gave a really good picture of what it's like for those who are truly disadvantaged. He took different situations that can become an identity, such as being deaf, having schizophrenia, being the product of rape, dwarfism, down syndrome, autism, and so many more. He interviews and sticks with these stories for years to see how they carry on in life with this identity if they choose to see themselves as just their

disability. It truly is sad, but he does such a great job of pointing out the injustice and telling the stories of people who have been so wrongfully abused or hurt in life due to something they were either born with or can't control. It is so disappointing to know people who relate to these chapters and never get the justice that they deserve.

Finally, I want to bring up the second to last book we were given to read, *When Breath becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. This book was full of sadness. The author is the main character of the book. At the beginning of the book, he finds out he has cancer, right after he finally becomes a surgeon. He has a wife, Lucy, who at first, struggles to be married to him because their marriage was already struggling. He promised her a life of happiness and up until then, they were at work all the time and most of it, on opposite work schedules. He promises it would be different and she argues that statement. When he finds out he has cancer, everything changed. Him and Lucy end up having a baby girl only to have her father die eight months after her birth. How is this right? Well, in his final months, he wrote this book to tell people to never take life for granted and to pursue dreams. There was nothing right about what him and his family had to go through. But God made good from it and he wrote a book that can help families process and grieve the losses.

His wife writes the epilogue at the end of the book and I feel that this quotation best explains his intention for his book.

Paul's decision not to avert his eyes from death epitomizes a fortitude we don't celebrate enough in our death-avoidant culture. His strength was defined by ambition and effort, but also by softness, the opposite of bitterness. He spent much of his life wrestling with the question of how to live a meaningful life, and his book explores the essential territory. 'Always the seer is a sayer,' Emerson wrote. 'Somehow his dream is

told; somehow he publishes it with solemn joy.' Writing this book was a chance for this courageous seer to be a sayer, to teach us to face death with integrity.

I believe that reading this book, it helped me see that people like Paul are needed in this world—especially to those that identify themselves with their disabilities, mentioned in Solomon's book, *Far from the Tree*.

All of this is to say, we are all entitled to our beliefs. We all live different lives, interacting with people who are also struggling. I think it's about time we take our blinders off and see people for who they are and fight for the justice they deserve. This can mean something different for every person. Personally, I am pursuing a career in Christian Counseling to help people better understand themselves, so that they can, not only be fought for but even better, fight for themselves. In this class, I now better understand what Social Justice is. I could not be more grateful for the knowledge I know I will never forget. Based on my past mission trips, knowing who God is and what He has for us as His children, and the stories I have read in this class; I know that I can no longer justify living in a lukewarm life of Christianity. I need to step out even in my daily life and be there for those who need a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on. That is what Jesus would do; He would love first.

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