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What is Social Justice?

In 2020, we see social justice initiatives more than ever: Black Lives Matter, Pro-choice/Pro-life, and the Women's March are just a few of the most mainstream ones that have become everyday discussions in recent years. Personally, my twitter feed is plagued with tweets from either side of the issue advocating and critiquing. These social justice initiatives have become extremely politically polarized, as well. Democrats and those on the left side of the political spectrum are called snowflakes and bleeding hearts. Republicans and those on the right of the political spectrum are known to be heartless and care more about the economy than people. This polarization has increasingly affected the evangelical Christian community by pulling them further right, mostly through claims about abortion. Through this last election cycle, I saw and heard many Christians claiming that others could not call themselves Christians if they voted for a certain candidate. This is obviously not Christlike. While I do not think social justice issues should be polarized in the way they are now and it is undeniably political at this point, I will not be focusing much on the politics of social justice issues. My hope in this paper is to take what I have learned from my many Christian Studies courses and combine that with what I have learned from class this semester. Through looking at different biblical passages and the American church culture surrounding social justice initiatives, we will find that the foundational element for justice is love. While seemingly simple, choosing to love our neighbors often has broader implications than many Christians are willing to admit.

Throughout the Old Testament, social injustice is prevalent and condemned. It is important to grasp Israel's understanding of justice because it is very different than modern day connotations. The ethics of the Israelites were primarily found in their experience with

God and their history of oppression and struggle. Coming from a situation where they have been enslaved and delivered, they are able to have thorough insight in how justice should be given. They understand it as a function of how one should live in community with one another. Within the prophets, it means to practice grace and mercy towards those that are defenseless. The prophets have been misunderstood as being able to see the future, however the majority of the time their function is to call the nation back to God. Isaiah specifically speaks about injustices against the most vulnerable in Israel in order to call the nation to repentance and bring righteousness back. The Lord speaks through Isaiah on justice in 1:21-27, a condemnation of the city of Jerusalem.

See how the faithful city has become a prostitute! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her—but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, partners with thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow's case does not come before them. Therefore, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: "Ah! I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies. I will turn my hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your leaders as in days of old, your rulers as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City." Zion will be delivered with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness.

Justice is absent when corruption and failure to protect orphans and widows is present in society. Israel was a patriarchal society, making orphans and widows among the most vulnerable. Corruption in leadership often exploited those who depended on them most for fairness and equality, typically those that could not achieve those things for themselves. In this sense, injustice is an inability to function in a society with respect and compassion for those that do not have the same privileges as others.

Other times in the Old Testament, when we see Israel linked to promiscuity, it is often an example of their idolatry. However, we see Isaiah connect promiscuity to social or moral

violations. Furthermore, he uses the term murderers to most likely refer to the rulers and leaders of Israel, those that shoulder the responsibility of upholding justice in Israel. Ray Ortlund speculates that Isaiah uses such a heavy word to include all varieties of criminals, the worst mentioned to imply all lesser ones. (Ortlund, 78) His use of murderer shows the harsh reality of how Israel has failed to preserve justice and implies that the effects of these injustices are like death to those that experience them. The oppressors that are being referred to here were members of the royal military and judicial bureaucracies in Israel. As the bureaucracies grew larger, they slowly obtained more land and gained economic and legal power. Commoners began to fall victim to exploitation, especially widows and orphans because they did not have a family provider. Through taxations, forced enlistment to the military, high interest rates, and other cruel policies, they became disenfranchised and lost their rights as citizens. In the next verses, we see the Lord, in his state of power and supremacy, choose to identify with the powerless and the oppressed by coming to their defense and pouring out his wrath on Israel. In verse 27, Isaiah claims that “Zion will be ransomed with justice.” Scholars have debated whether Isaiah intended that justice describes the means or the results of the deliverance and whether it depicts God’s righteousness or the Israelite’s. If it is focused on the Israelites, then it implies that that the reestablishment of Zion as the center of justice will bring deliverance. However, most scholars have decided that the use of righteousness and justice in this passage refer to God alone or is referencing both, God’s character and human justice. If it refers to both, these terms refer to both God’s work of redemption and the human response of repentance. “Genuine repentance begins, but by no means ends, with heartfelt conviction of sin. It begins with an unequivocal, heart-rending recognition of having defied God by embracing what he despises and hating, or at

minimum, being indifferent towards, what he adores.” (Storms) Through repentance, God softens our hearts to be more in tune with His, in order to initiate a change in our behaviors. Repentance is absolutely necessary to bring justice to those that have been hurt by the inequities in our world. The kind of repentance that is required of us is not just an end to the past sinful behaviors, but a complete embrace of the soul and consequent actions that are honoring to God. Through true repentance, we love others well.

While these passages from the Old Testament seem to give us a good working definition of social justice and make it clear that it is an imperative for believers, some Christians might disregard this because it was directed at the Israelites and they were still living under the law. This reasoning against social justice in the bible is not well informed and very ignorant. However, the New Testament—and specifically Jesus—spoke out against injustices as well. One of the passages that has become widely circulated amongst Christians today is Matthew 25:31-46.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not

do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This passage is often called The Judgement of Nations, or The Parable of the Sheep and Goats, however this is more of an eschatological vision than a parable. Jesus conveys the mercy through six different actions: food, drink, hospitality, clothing, care, and visitation. While Jesus teaches on service, he did not invent this. The Torah Law required landowners to leave the edges of their property unharvested for the needy (Leviticus 19:9-10), employers to pay workers daily to pay for their daily bread (Deuteronomy 24:15), and for widows and orphans to be supported (Exodus 22:22). This further elevates the Old Testament justification for social justice, as Jesus came to fulfill the Law, not to demolish it. The list of six mercies in this passage are meant to be more expository, than comprehensive. Jesus citing these specific examples of feeding the hungry or visiting prisoners are to show the practicality of social justice. There are plenty of other needs that are prevalent today that need to be acted upon. Just as human needs have no limits, neither do the opportunities for mercy. It is important to note that the nature of the needs listed can at least be momentarily fulfilled by anyone. Every person has the potential to help. We see other passages where Jesus tells a rich man to sell everything he owns and give money to the poor, but there is no demand for that here. The actions that are rewarded by God are well within reach of the average Christian. In verse 37, the righteous men ask "*Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?*" We see that the righteous men did not know the potential to be rewarded for their generosity, they did it out of the kindness of their hearts. As previously mentioned, repentance causes us to embrace

characteristics and actions that are pleasing to God. As Christians, we should show mercy to others as an extension of God's love for us, without ulterior motives. The king goes on to explain that whatever the men did to the least of these, they did to him. In Genesis, it is established that all humans are made in the image of God. To be image bearers of the Creator means to recognize that God's plans and purposes for creation can be produced through humans. In addition to that, there are moral implications to being created in his image. If we are called to love God, then we are called to love other humans because each person is also made in God's image. "Not only was man created in the divine image—a factual biblical determination...being created in God's image is the reason for man's being beloved."

(Loberbaum) God's love toward us is not calculated by how lovable we are, instead it is determined by his character. Because of Christ's transforming work on the cross, we should not withhold our love from fellow image bearers because of our own personal biases. In learning about God's image in humans, we can also see how He can identify with us in our struggles. An unjust act towards any of us personally offends God because of our innate reflection of Him and his love for us. He identifies with the widows, orphans, and the least of these because they are his beloved creation. In class, a representative from Our House came to speak to us about their mission of empowering homeless and impoverished people through meals, education, and careers. Our House saw a need amongst some of the most vulnerable for long term shelter options and assistance in planning for the future. The founders, and many employees and volunteers since then, have actively chosen to identify with the homeless population in Central Arkansas to show love and meet practical needs. Jesus demonstrates through this parable that justice is best demonstrated through love for one

another. The fight for justice for marginalized groups would cease to exist without compassion and mercy fueling the fire.

I think one of the biggest issues plaguing our church today is the rejection of labels and secular methods of justice. For example, many Christians believe that black lives matter, but they refuse to see any merit behind the organization of Black Lives Matter because of their Marxist backgrounds, so they reject the movement as a whole. Or Christians who believe that men and women should have equal rights but refuse to call themselves feminists because of the radicals out there. This has built a culture of complacency, and even hatred sometimes, when it comes to social justice initiatives, especially those that deal with equal rights. Something that I have learned time and time again throughout my education at Ouachita is that biblical truth is biblical truth regardless of where it is found. Divine grace has been imparted on everyone. This simply means that God allows believers and unbelievers alike to partake in the gifts that he has given. Within the context of social justice, it means that sometimes secular organizations or ideologies are going to thrive—which is largely due to Christians not being involved in social justice efforts. Christians are comfortable if we are helping people through a ministry at our church and we do not have to become too involved, but when it is presented as an actual social change that needs to be made, people throw fits. My home church does many free health clinics in my hometown and around the world for people who are in need. These services include wellness checks, vaccinations, eyecare, wheelchair fittings and donations, and dental work. But I would be willing to bet that well more than half the people who have volunteered with those ministries would not permit any form of universal healthcare. I am not entirely educated on universal healthcare, but I do know that not every church in the world is equipped or willing to provide

the kind of medical clinics that mine does, so something needs to be done to make it accessible for those that are unable to go to a healthcare ministry. Many people will never see the need for justice until they personally need it. We see this displayed in *When Breath Becomes Air* in some ways. Paul became a medical professional, but never saw the full picture until he was diagnosed with cancer. While of course there were things throughout his life that prepared him to be a patient, he could never fully grasp the emotions of his patients until he assumed that role for himself. We have a very limited point of view because we can only understand things from our personal perspective. However, this lack of understanding should not limit our willingness to love.

As I have previously mentioned, if the bare minimum to want to fight for justice for our brothers and sisters is love, then one could make the claim that the modern day church is not loving—at least not towards those that have different or greater needs than what we are accustomed to. To clarify, each Christian has their own personal convictions that have been laid on their hearts by God. We have all been gifted differently and called to different areas of ministry or justice. Personally, I feel called to do advocacy and ministry work with immigrants in the United States. But I understand that not everyone has been equipped for that same job. It would be impossible for us to educate ourselves on every justice initiative and actively work to solve the inequities. That would be so draining and we would not make any real progress anywhere. However, we are all called to love. The American church has miserably failed in doing the bare minimum for justice issues. I believe that if we fulfilled our calling to love our neighbor, many injustices would either be greatly diminished or cease to exist.

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