

# “Heavenly Virtues - Justice”

*Micah 6:8; Exodus 2:11–15; Jeremiah 7:1–11*

**“Social justice” is a redundancy;  
all justice is social**



Let me repeat that: “Social justice” is redundant, for all justice is social. Justice is a social concept; it necessarily refers to others. How we live with them, how we treat them, how we are treated, and so on. It is about giving everyone their due. It is best thought of as a verb, as in Micah 6:8 – justice is something we do – with and for others.

Each week in this series, I am going to bring an excerpt from Karen Swallow Prior’s excellent book, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*, which helped me grasp the virtues much better than I ever had before. Here is some of what she wrote about justice, the third of Aristotle’s cardinal virtues:

Justice is the morality of the community. The morality of a community shapes individual thinking, values, and behavior. Aristotle calls justice “anything just that tends to produce or preserve happiness and its constituents for the community of a city.” In *The Republic*, Plato says that virtue in an individual is “a certain health, beauty, and good condition of a soul.” Justice, therefore, can be understood as the virtue of a community, the harmony of all the souls that form it.

But although justice is enacted in community, each community is made up of individuals who together make a society just or unjust. The just society is the one that frees people to do good. In other words, a just society allows all of its members to cultivate the virtue of justice, for even individual ethics “are much affected by the ethos” of the community in which one lives.

The virtue of justice is the habit of desiring and doing what is just. In “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says, simply, “the just man justifies.” At first glance, these definitions seem circular, saying, in essence, the just person is just. Yet it echoes the wisdom of one of the twentieth century’s great philosophers, Forrest Gump’s mother, who advised her mentally challenged son, “Stupid is as stupid does.” Justice is, in this sense, its own measure.

But justice also takes its measure from the relationship of one thing to another. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Elaine Scarry defines justice as “a symmetry of everyone’s relations to each other.” Justice is “an absolute good in itself” and is the measure of the other virtues since prudence, courage, and temperance can be virtuous only when oriented toward just ends. All external acts are socially consequential and therefore connected to justice in some way. Indeed, justice is “the whole of virtue,” according to Aristotle. The most excellent person, Aristotle says, is the one whose virtue is perfected in relationship to others, and justice is always expressed “in relation to another person.” Justice is the mean between selfishness and selflessness. That mean has implications within political, economic, social, and racial realms, just as it has implications for the inner life of the soul. Justice orders a person within herself as well as the lives of people together.<sup>1</sup>

## **What does God require of us?**

What does God require of us? Simply this: that we would do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). These three simple phrases give shape to the sort of life God would have us lead and the choices God would have us make. Though the three phrases make a unified whole, each of them is built on a very important biblical word, including “justice” (*mispat* in the Hebrew).

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<sup>1</sup> Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition. Prior has many citations in these paragraphs, but I have left them out due to space limitations.

I don't think we often speak of "doing" justice, but the simple verb "do" captures the biblical meaning perfectly. In Scripture, "justice" is something we do, it is an action. It is never merely taking note of inequities or wrong. It is doing something about them. When we see a person being wronged by another, it is never enough simply to note the wrong, sigh in sympathy, and move on. "Doing justice" is correcting that wrong. Further, across the biblical story, justice is particularly about looking after the interests of those who cannot look after their own: the poor, the immigrant, the widows, and orphans. The biblical view is that the rich and powerful can do a pretty fine job looking after themselves; the poor cannot.

The importance to God of our doing justice is seen throughout the Bible, especially in the dramatic stories of two men: Moses and the prophet Jeremiah.

### ***Freedom from bondage***

What could be more unjust than one human owning another, considering them as property. The fact that slavery was an accepted fact of life in the ancient world speaks to the depth of human sinfulness. And in ancient Egypt, God's people were held in bondage, but heard their cries and began to do justice, through a man named Moses.

Now Moses was born at exactly the wrong time. Fearing the growing number of Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh had ordered the murder of all male Hebrew babies – including Moses. In order to save her baby, Moses' mother had placed the infant in a small waterproof basket and set him afloat on the Nile river, hoping that someone would save him. Someone did. And not just any someone, but the daughter of Pharaoh herself. Though she knew the baby was a Hebrew, she "took pity on him" and plucked him out of the water. Seeing all this, Pharaoh's sister (yes, it seems the like the whole family is ignoring Pharaoh's orders) sought out a woman who could nurse the newborn, finding Moses's mother—of all people. When Moses was old enough to be weaned, his mother brought him to the palace where Pharaoh's daughter raised him as her own.

It's not hard to imagine what Moses' life was like. Being raised as a member of Pharaoh's household meant a life of privilege and luxury. Moses' stepmother must have told him about the circumstances of his birth, though surely it was a secret held among the two of them and Pharaoh's sister.

When did Moses begin to identify with his fellow Hebrews? Why does he care so much that he is willing to kill an Egyptian to save a Hebrew slave from a beating? Perhaps this is how it is with our various life crises. We reach a point in life when so much of what we have assumed about ourselves and our world is called into question. It would be foolish to speculate too long about Moses' motivations, but his aims are clear. He will stand up for the Hebrews, for justice.

When Moses kills the Egyptian overseer, he knows exactly what he has done. He tries, unsuccessfully, to cover up the murder but word gets out and Moses has to flee. So he heads out into the land of Midian. After all this, we are told that God heard the cries of the Hebrews and remembered his covenant with Abraham. "God looked upon the Israelites and God took notice of them" (Exodus 2:25). And Moses would soon see a bush that burned without being consumed, beginning in earnest the story of the Israelites' liberation from slavery.

### ***Jeremiah***

About six centuries before Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah makes his way to the Temple gate. There, he stands in front of the massive doors and confronts his fellow Israelites. God's people have driven themselves over a cliff and now there is no turning back. It is too late; it is a "done deal" (see Jeremiah 4:28 for example). They have passed the point of no return. The "ifs" of Jeremiah 7:5-7 are not about righting the ship or drawing back from the brink, as was the case in other times. Instead, Jeremiah drives home the point that the time of reckoning has come. The "ifs," the warnings, proved fruitless before, and now the poison fruit that the people have grown is about to be their undoing. They have not done justice and now they would reap the consequences. A few decades after Jeremiah's pronouncement, the Babylonian Empire rolls over Jerusalem, exiles tens of thousands of Jews, and destroys the majestic temple built by Solomon.

Why did this happen? Certainly, the biblical view is that it was God’s judgment on an unjust people, a verdict rendered and carried out. A fair verdict, a just verdict. The people grasped that it was their own sin that was their undoing; yes, they had abandoned God and, yes, they had failed to do justice.

***And today?***

I close this week, with an excerpt from the famous letter Rev. Martin Luther King wrote while in a Birmingham, Alabama jail in 1963. He was harshly treated in the jail and received a letter from eight white Alabama clergymen condemning King and his methods of non-violent civil disobedience as “untimely and unwise.” Here is a small portion of King’s lengthy letter, first written on newsprint and scraps of paper sneaked to him in his cell:

And now this approach [of civil disobedience] is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal . . ." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?

**Daily Bible Readings**

*More on justice*

<b>Monday</b>	<b>Leviticus 19:9-18</b>	The practical doing of justice in the Law
<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Isaiah 1:16-17</b>	Seek justice
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Jeremiah 9:24</b>	God delights in justice
<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Amos 5:21–24</b>	Let justice roll
<b>Friday</b>	<b>Matthew 21:12-17</b>	Jesus the words of Jeremiah
<b>Saturday</b>	<b>Matthew 25:31-46</b>	The judgment of the nations