

# **BETHLEHEM BAPTIST CHURCH**

## **Bible Study Topic: Exploring Biblical and Social Justice**

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The word "justice" has garnered national global attention. Everywhere you turn the call for justice has taken on a heightened urgency. Although it is not the sole remedy for the global sickness, this call for justice if it is to have any depth, is a call for intervention. It is a call for a quality of intervention transcends broken humanity. Humanity's attempt to restore justice, establish justice, or execute justice in and of itself, will always come up short. Biases and prejudices, and racial hang ups will always undermine humanity's best efforts. True, real, authentic justice can only come from God. Thus, the starting point and the Christian's source for justice is God. The life and lifestyle of Jesus, not Christianity was God's tangible example and execution of JUSTICE. Any search for justice begins first with the Creator and is fully unveiled in the "lip and hip" movement of Jesus. Any attempt to understand justice that excludes understanding of God and God's word, will result in contextual and short-lived justice. Let's be clear in this study, social justice and biblical justice are not equals.

### **A. DEFINING JUSTICE BIBLICALLY.**

#### 1. The Biblical words related to Justice.

In the Old Testament, the key root meaning fall into three groups. The first root basically "connotes conformity to an ethical or moral standard" defined by the nature and will of God and revealed in His law. The second root form of justice signifies "the exercise of the processes of government". This form of the root word basically implies "conformity to an ethical or moral standard" as defined by the nature and will of God and revealed in His law. The third root form of the word "justice" embodies the "idea of government in whatever realm, in all of its aspects".

In the New Testament, the key root meaning fall into two groups. The first root means being in accordance with high standards of moral conduct, upright, just, or fair. The second root meaning denotes legal process of judgment or administration of what is right and fair; right in the sense of righteousness. Careful study of these words throughout the Old and New Testaments would suggest that the Biblical concept of justice as "rendering impartially and proportionally to everyone his due in accord with the righteous standard of God's moral law.

## 2. Four Criteria of Justice.

The Bible reveals four criteria of Justice. **First**, Justice requires **impartiality**. An equal application of all relevant rules to all people in all relevant situations. In Deuteronomy when Moses commissioned the judges of Israel, he charged them, "Hear the cases, "judge" (shaphat), between your brethren, and judge (shaphat) righteously (tsedeq), between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment (mishpat); you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment (mishpat) is God's" (Deut. 1:16–17). Thus judgment then, is always impartial. **Second**, Justice requires rendering to each his due. Paul instructs believers to "render to all their dues..." (Romans 13:7), and he puts this instruction in a discussion of justice or "judgment" (v. 2, "judgment" kríma). Again, God is the chief exemplar: "... will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" (Proverbs 24:12; cf. Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6; 1 Corinthians 3:8; Galatians 6:7–8). A key concept in justice, then, is that something about the person being judged merits (or earns) the judgment. Sometimes the "what is due" is determined by who someone is. Examples include governing authorities (Romans 13:1–7, 1 Peter 2:13–14); parents (Ephesians 6:1–3, Colossians 3:20, Deuteronomy 5:16) and religious leaders (Hebrews 13:17, Acts 23:1–5). Sometimes, however, what is due is determined by what someone does. Elders are due double honor if they rule well (1 Timothy 5:17); The proud are due punishment (Psalm 94:2); Murderers deserve death (Genesis 9:6). **Third**, Justice requires proportionality, a sense of symmetry between the initial acts, on the one hand, and the rewards or punishments, on the other. This principle appears in Scripture in two ways. First, proportionality distinguishes generally between **violations of property and violations of persons**. There are different kinds and degrees of punishment prescribed for the two (Leviticus 24:17–21). Second, proportionality distinguishes accidental harm, negligent harm, and intentional harm. For instance, if someone accidentally damages or destroys his neighbor's property, justice evens up the loss between them (Exodus 21:35). But if he might reasonably have foreseen and prevented the accident but did not, and so harms his neighbor negligently, he must bear the full loss alone and restore to his neighbor the full value of what was damaged or destroyed (Exodus 21:36; compare Exodus 22:6). And if he intentionally steals or destroys his neighbor's property, he must restore what is taken, plus some multiple of it, as punishment (Exodus 22:1). Similarly, accidental homicide deserves no punishment (Deuteronomy 19:4–6; Exodus 21:13); negligent homicide deserves death, but the heirs of the deceased (or possibly the judges) may permit a ransom (Exodus

21:29–30). However, the intentional murderer must be executed without pity (Deuteronomy 19:11–13; Exodus 21:14), no ransom being permitted (Numbers 35:31; see also Deuteronomy 25:1–3; Exodus 21:24–27; Leviticus 24:19–20; Luke 12:42–48). **Fourth**, Justice requires conformity to the standard set forth in God's law—summarized in the Ten Commandments but also in the many moral statutes, ordinances, and case laws that apply the Ten Commandments and make them more specific. In this respect, justice (or righteousness) is closely akin to truthfulness and honesty. Thus, for instance, God commanded Israel, "You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight, or volume. You shall have honest scales (literally, "scales of righteousness").