

CHAPTER 1

## What Is Justice?



When days grow dark and nights grow dreary, we can be thankful that our God combines in his nature a creative synthesis of love and justice that will lead us through life's dark valleys and into sunlit pathways of hope and fulfillment.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., *STRENGTH TO LOVE* [1963]

## The Four Brothers Who Ruin Justice

In the first book of the Old Testament, we find a story of twin boys, Esau and Jacob. The firstborn, Esau, is loved by his father and becomes a skilled hunter. The younger brother, Jacob, is loved by his mother, and becomes a tent dweller. Jacob first deceives Esau in a moment of famished weakness by bartering Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew. His mother then plans for him to steal his brother's blessing—the blessing due to the eldest in Jewish custom. As far as we know, never does the younger say, "Hey, Ma, this is wrong!" Instead, he immediately and actively participates in the scam, thinking through the deceptive details of what he had to do. The meaning of his name reflects his character; he is a deceiver. In the end, it is this younger son—this deceiver—who becomes the father of the Israelites. It is the younger son whose name is often referenced when future generations talk of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the end, it is the younger son, whose name God changes and then calls his people by that same name. The Israelites are the strivers, the strugglers, because Jacob strove and struggled with God.

Fast forward to the New Testament. In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of two brothers. The elder brother is a faithful servant, never openly rebelling against his father and never leaving his father's house. The younger brother, however, decides to boldly request his inheritance before it was time to receive it, and then he leaves his father's house and goes off squandering all of that inheritance. He ends up in the midst of famine and gets a job feeding slop to pigs. Things get so bad, he begins to covet the pigs' food. His thoughts of his father's house haunt him; the servants who once served him have a better life than his current one. So he heads back home, hoping his father will let him return as a hired laborer. When he was close to approaching his former residence, his father runs to meet him in the road. I imagine the father smothering his son with hugs and kisses, barely hearing him beg for forgiveness as he yells at his servants to get the son new clothes, new shoes, and the family ring. The father throws a party for his son, infuriating the elder brother who will not join the festivities. The father leaves the party, tracks the elder son down and asks him what's wrong.

"Look how many years I've stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores—shows up and you go all out with a feast!" (Luke 15:29-30, MSG). The father replies, "Son, you don't understand. You're with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful

time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he's alive! He was lost, and he's found!" (Luke 15:31-32, MSG). That is the end of the story. We never know if the elder comes to understand, or if the brothers reconcile. At the beginning of Luke 15, Luke gives us a bit of insight into why Jesus told this story: the Pharisees were grumbling at Jesus because he ate with sinners like old friends, when the Pharisees had strived at great length to remain pure and holy.

These two stories really mess with my idea of justice. I hope they mess with your idea of it too. It's the faithful older brother who deserved the party. It was Esau who deserved his father's blessing. These stories prove that God's *modus operandi* relies neither on merit nor human tradition.

When we look at justice from a biblical standpoint, we must redefine not only justice, but also merit. As Christians, we must understand that either our natural perception of justice is skewed, or God's is. The Almighty thought it just to send his righteous Son to die in our place. That's messed up. Or I'm messed up. Or both. The Holy One—whose righteousness is as pure as snow, in comparison to our righteousness, which is as dirty as a menstrual cloth—called us His children. That's messed up. That's not justice as I know it. The earthly justice I know involves rapists getting the death penalty and terrorists being blown up by their own bombs. It involves safeguarding myself against suspicious people and demanding payment of every service I provide another human being. However, if I stake claim in the Christian doctrine of salvation, the logical conclusion is that my earthly view of justice does not equate to the heavenly version. "An earthly view of justice is inward-looking, self-serving, and protects our own self-worth. Heavenly justice makes us admit that we're part of, and contribute to, the systems of oppression," says my good friend, Laurel Fiorelli.

The kingdom of heaven is made up of liars and cheaters who have been redeemed. Redemption is not only possible for deceivers, but redemption-for-deceivers is the essence of the good news. On the surface, this upside down kingdom seems unfair to those of us who have worked hard their whole lives. It seems unfair for those of us who have been faithful their whole lives. Because we live in systems based on accomplishments. If I do something good, I deserve something good. If I do something bad, I deserve something bad. This is the core of the American idea of justice. But God is not an American. Good does not always equate to salvation. Bad does not always equate to condemnation. Eugene Peterson paraphrased the prophet Ezekiel's words well:

A good person's good life won't save him when he decides to rebel, and a bad person's bad life won't prevent him from repenting of his rebellion. A good person who sins can't expect to live when he chooses to sin. It's true that I tell good people, 'Live! Be alive!' But if they trust in their good deeds and turn to evil, that good life won't amount to a hill of beans. They'll die for their evil life. On the other hand, if I tell a wicked person, 'You'll die for your wicked life,' and he repents of his sin and starts living a righteous and just life — being generous to the down-and-out, restoring what he had stolen, cultivating life-nourishing ways that don't hurt others — he'll live. He won't die. None of his sins will be kept on the books. He's doing what's right, living a good life. He'll live. (Ezekiel 33:12-16, MSG).

We can never be *good enough*. If fairness ruled the world and we all lived by the scrutiny of the eyes of the public, I'd go to heaven and Paul (formally known as Saul) would not. But in the eyes of biblical law, I would not. The wages of sin is death, and I have sinned over and over and over again. I may not have murdered, but I have gossiped and I have daily filled my belly with pride. I have lied and hated others, committing murder in my heart, which Christ says, is *the same* as pulling the trigger of a real gun with a real bullet, ending a real life. While there are few external sins for the public to see, there is an array of internal sins that God is not blind to. Romans 6:23 does not distinguish between these internal and external sins by caveating "The wages of *external* sin is death." No, within the confines of this vast definition of sin, no one can say they deserve eternal life. This crucial to the gospel. Fairness would result in me receiving punishment for all of my internal and external sins. Thank God He is not *fair* but *just*. And thank God that Christ came as a gargantuan example of God's justice.

The minute we think we deserve something because of our actions is the moment we hinder Christ's power in our lives. Jesus came to serve, even though He merits the exact opposite. He deserved *to be served*; yet He washed the nasty grunge off the unmanicured feet of His wayward disciples. His version of royalty involved stable-birthing, donkey-riding, and stinky fisherman-advising. In the world's eyes, he certainly didn't act like a king. And this backwardness wasn't just reserved for the King of kings. It's for everyday people like you and me. Jacob comes to mind again. He was a conniving schemer, a liar, and a deceiver. Yet he's the brother who dreams of heaven's ladders. He's the brother who sees the gate to eternity. He's the brother who wrestles

God and is forever changed both in his identity, through a name change, and in his manner of walking, now with a limp. Every new step he took and every time someone called him by his new name, he was reminded of his divine encounter. Not only did Jacob get his father's blessing, but as Genesis 28 says, he got a blessing from God as well.

Christ brings justice not fairness; and justice redeems us all, regardless of our merit. God's justice redeems us, whether we are firstborn or not. Whether we are external or internal sinners, or both. Whether we are educated or not, strong or not, deceptive or not. Despite our lying tongues, our selfish pride, and our cries that this is an unfair world, those under His wings know that justice is much sweeter than fairness, for fairness would have all of humanity eventually lying in an abysmal, miry pit.

## Faith. Reason. Justice.

This is the motto of Eastern University. It's complicated and often feels paradoxical.

FAITH: The evidence of things unseen.

REASON: The process of logic.

JUSTICE: Heaven's kingdom on earth.<sup>1</sup>

There is a battle between faith and reason in my head, in my life, in my marriage. How can one person find the balance between the two? Martin Luther King Jr. gives insight into this conflict in the following quote: "Their respective worlds are different and their methods are dissimilar. Science investigates; religion interprets. Science gives man knowledge that is power; religion gives man wisdom that is control. Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary. Science keeps religion from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism. Religion prevents science from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism."<sup>2</sup> If you can think of it as reason when King says science, and think of it as faith when King says religion, then:

"Reason keeps faith from sinking into the valley of crippling irrationalism and paralyzing obscurantism. Faith prevents reason from falling into the marsh of obsolete materialism and moral nihilism."

I thought of myself as a woman of faith until I met my husband, Andrew. It didn't take long to realize he is a man of faith, and I am a woman of reason. For four years,

we were on the mission field in Mexico, and often faced financial stress of making ends meet. He would look at an empty bank account and say, “Don’t worry. God will provide.” I would look at that same account and say in earnest, “How can we help God provide?” Neither of those two concepts can stay stagnant. Divine faith includes reason, and divine reason includes faith. Therefore, I must always be moving closer to the faith side of reason, while people like Andrew must always be working toward the reason side of faith, and we both must use that equilibrium to fuel a better understanding of justice. Ultimately, we must recognize why faith, reason, and justice were created—*redemption*. If reason is not used for redemptive purposes, it can stay stagnant or worse, it can become a self-seeking power. If faith is not used for redemption, it can lead us to irrationalism, obscurity, and possibly even heinous acts we say are the will of God. If we have a perfect balance of faith and reason but don’t use that balance for God’s redemptive justice, we become internally developed but externally disconnected and irrelevant, like a hermit genius. Faith, reason, and justice are not sufficient on their own; they must be practiced in tandem in order to be fully understood.

In the summer of 2013, I visited the Genocide Museum in Kigali, Rwanda, with my friend Maurice. In 1994, Maurice was 25 years old and working as a teacher. He returned to his rural hometown when the killings started, and there hid his coworker Juvenal along with five of the neighborhood children in his parent’s attic. The six were killed by the machetes of an angry mob while Maurice was trying to negotiate a price to pay the mob to keep them alive. Walking through a museum that told me unfathomable stories next to my friend who lived those stories was an unforgettable experience. Please see the epilogue for a bigger piece of Maurice’s story.

What hit me the hardest was the section dedicated to the memory of other genocides throughout the history of the world. It was impressive and important to remember that the 1994 Rwandan genocide was not an isolated event—there are so many others: the Indian Removal Act under President Jackson and the American Indian Trail of Tears<sup>3</sup>, the Holocaust, Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, ethnic cleansing during the Bosnian War, the Darfur genocide, the first and second Congo Wars, the Syrian conflict, Al Qaeda, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State/ISIS. This list barely touches the surface but points to something profound. Man, at his worst, is capable of heinous crimes. Man, at his best, is capable of forgiving abhorrent injustices. And by *man*, I mean *me*. At my worst, I am capable of heinous crimes. At my best, I am capable

of forgiving abhorrent injustices enacted against me. At our fullest, we are seeking redemptive justice and empowering others to do the same.

Thirteen years after Juvenal’s murder, Maurice found out that the director at his school told the killers that he and Juvenal left for Maurice’s hometown. He heard the director left Rwanda and has not returned. “I would forgive him, definitely,” Maurice said. “Especially when I got saved, I realized that behind all of that, it was the devil lurking. So it was with all the other people who committed unbelievable actions. ... And I think if they all ask for forgiveness and repent of their sins, the blood of Jesus is so strong — it covers all of those.”

Victims forgiving those who’ve enacted injustice against them are living an unfathomable fullness, and pointing onlookers to the gospel.

In June 2015, 21-year-old Dylann Roof killed nine members of Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Roof premeditated the murders. “He pulled the trigger ‘more than 75 times ... reloading seven times’ as he stood over his victims, shooting them repeatedly... .”<sup>4</sup> At Roof’s bond hearing, several of the victims’ family members spoke to him. “Gayle Jackson, the niece of Susie Jackson, told Roof that while she prayed that God would have mercy on his mother, ‘I want your soul to burn in hell.’”<sup>5</sup> This response seems justifiable. I might very well respond the same way.

But Alanna Simmons and Bethane Middleton-Brown, among others, responded much differently. They offered Roof forgiveness. “‘Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, this is proof that they lived and loved,’ [Alanna] said. ‘Hate won’t win.’”<sup>6</sup> Bethane said, “I wanted to hate you, but my faith tells me no. I wanted to remain angry and bitter, but my view of life won’t let me.”<sup>7</sup>(ABC)

Bethane’s faith drew a boundary line that even her own raw emotions were not allowed to cross. That is not an emotional, wavering faith, but a reason-filled faith that seeks redemption on the Earth—even when the earth doesn’t deserve it, and seeking it means dying to self. To live is Christ.

Faith tugs at us and reminds us that eternity must be a part of our perspective. Reason reminds us to use logic—a divinely created concept—in a way that protects us from getting a god complex. Justice is the path we walk when we balance faith and reason in order to bring the kingdom of heaven to Earth. Reason has us make plans, but faith reminds us to hold those plans loosely, because only God can ordain our steps. Reason tells us to follow our cultural norms, while faith reminds us there is another kingdom whose nationality should be stronger in our hearts than our

regional nationality. Faith tells us to trust God and let Him guide our steps, while reason reminds us it's wise to use a map when we don't know where we are going. It's a balancing act. Sometimes we feel like we are flailing about on a tightrope. Faith says we can walk across. Reason tells us to be prepared before we do. Justice reminds us that we are walking across for a purpose, not merely for bragging rights. God is not calling us to be wise, lonely hermits nor is he asking us to be unaware, religious fanatics.

He calls us "to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke," (Isaiah 58:6, ESV). If faith is the assurance of things hoped for and reason is the divine gift of the logical process, what is the ideal kind of justice these two must move toward?

## Defining Justice

Let me make this clear, I am attempting to define biblical justice. I say *attempt*, because I am one sinful yet redeemed human being sharing my ideas backed by my interpretation of the Bible. While I share my insight here, it is your responsibility to line up what you consume with the Word. This is what I have found.

Biblical justice is the act of practicing the rightness of God on earth, therefore making the coming kingdom of heaven a present reality. In the words of my friend, Nathan Smith, "Justice is God's ideal for any given circumstance." When Nathan first said that, I could not get it out of my head. Justice is God's ideal for each circumstance. Anytime creation glorifies the Creator, God's justice is set in motion on earth. Every time nature does what it is created to do, it brings God glory. His glory ushers in His presence; and where He is, justice reigns.

Micah Challenge USA, a nonprofit organization that seeks to end extreme poverty, published the book *Live Justly*, in which they define Biblical justice as "the state of wholeness due all of God's creation." M. Andrew Gale, in his essay "*Justice, Mercy, Truth*," *A Theological Concept in the Sermons of John Wesley*, states: "For Wesley, justice was treating someone commensurate with their worth as being made in the image of God, contrary to one's propensity to simply care about one's own well-being. ... Wesley's praxis of justice was founded on the golden rule: a person is to treat another person the way they desire to be treated."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps justice feels like a harsh term for Americans. Justice reminds us of the legal system, of men on death row, of prison bars and penal codes. For black Americans

the word *justice* might automatically provoke ideas of the opposite of biblical justice, based on those same American penal systems that have been systemically oppressive. But we must remember that we are seeing justice through the lens of our American culture. In order to fully define God's justice, we recognize that God is not a citizen of any particular country or subgroup of that country. We must also recognize that God is a god of justice. If God is a god of justice, does he not expect his people to be people of justice? Our American way, however, is one of charity. Culturally speaking, we often like to make God a god of charity. The next chapter will dive into this concept in detail. Regardless of how we have come to understand Him or what we attempt to make Him, He is unchangeable, and we must dig deep into the Word of God to see the truth.

In the Spanish language, one word *justicia* is expressed by two words in English: justice and righteousness. In Proverbs 21:15, the English Standard Version says, "When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers." The New Living Translation says, "When what is right and fair is done, it is a joy for those who are right with God. But it fills the sinful with fear." In several passages in the Bible, one version will say *justice* while another says *righteousness*.

Justice can be broken down into two main Hebrew words, *mishpat* and *tzedakah*. Without getting too deep into hermeneutics, I appreciate Tim Keller's study of justice that can be found in his book *Generous Justice*. In the first chapter, he looks at these two Hebrew words. *Mishpat*, he says, "is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care," and *tzedakah*, he says, is "a life of right relationships." Keller says that the two words are found together over thirty times in the Old Testament conveying the English concept of social justice.

Here, a Hebrew glossary discusses these two words further:

**Mishpatim:** plural of mishpat. (meesh-pah-TEEM) n. Logical laws; Judgments; Laws given for a clearly specified reason. An example would be the commandment to give charity or the prohibitions against theft and murder. These mitzvot are inherently rational and appeal to the need for ethical unity (civil and moral life) within the community. The *mishpatim* are one of the two main subcategories of the concept of *mitzvot* (commandments). Mishpatim is also the name for a weekly Torah portion: Exodus 21:1-24:18.<sup>9</sup>

**Tzedakah:** (tse-dah-KAH) n. Righteousness; An act of righteousness; Charity; Benevolence; Justice. *Tzedakah* generally refers to the giving of money to help support

those in need and the helping institutions of one's community and is considered a religious obligation, distinct from the notions of charity or philanthropy, which are related to the concept of *chesed*. In other words, *tzedakah* is a *legal obligation* to help the unfortunate in society.<sup>10</sup>

Research done in English will often include the word charity when describing the Hebrew word *tzedakah*; but there are two distinctions that many scholars seem to agree on: 1) *tzedakah* derives from the root words justice, just, righteous **not** from words like gift or kindness, and 2) the concept of *tzedakah* goes beyond random, sporadic handouts. These two words *mishpat* and *tzedakah* will be discussed throughout the rest of this book, as each chapter will cover topics filtered through these concepts.

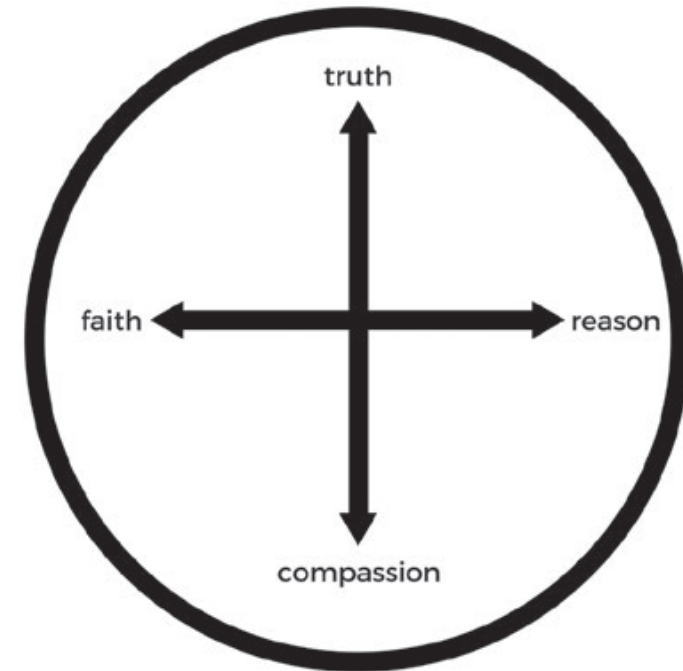
### Is Justice the Opposite of Love?

Typically, Americans understand justice as punishment and unconditional love as tolerance. By those definitions, it could be argued that justice and love are opposing. However, if we see justice and unconditional love through a biblical lens, it becomes clear the two intertwine most beautifully. Unconditional love starts where we are, offers us what we don't deserve, and then reminds us we are meant for so much more. But it doesn't stop at reminding us. Unconditional love provokes us to become better individuals, more loving parents, more graceful spouses, kinder, stronger, gentler, and more peaceful human beings.

Dr. Nicholas Wolterstorff warns us not to err in thinking that the Old Testament is about justice and the New Testament is about love. He says, "I think it's a deep mistake to think that justice has been superseded in the New Testament."<sup>11</sup> Matthew 12:20 (ESV) quotes a passage from Isaiah 42 saying, "Until he brings justice to victory." The passage is about Christ bringing justice to the Gentiles. Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies about justice, not to supersede them. He came to proclaim and bring justice. Wolterstorff says, "We have to reject the idea that love and justice are in conflict. We have to understand love in such a way and justice in such a way that the two fit together hand in glove."<sup>12</sup>

Right relationships are built on the foundation of love, because giving people what they are due is a natural outflow of the heart when love is present. Love and justice must be complimentary qualities. If I do not love my neighbor, I will not see the need

to treat him justly. Wolterstorff says, "Justice is always to be done out of love ... true love is never unjust."<sup>13</sup> Additionally, true biblical justice must involve mercy. Often our human eyes perceive passages in the Bible as opposing, when they are actually exposing the need for tension to exist. For example, the following qualities seem to oppose each other:



Tension between the two concepts create an equilibrium that they both need to flourish. Faith and reason complement each other and keep each other balanced. Reason left by itself can turn into arrogance. Faith left by itself can turn into irrational obscurity. It is the same for truth and compassion. Truth without compassion is cold and harsh. Compassion without truth does not require change. The two flourish when mixed and balanced. Justice is not the opposite of love. In fact, merciful love is the balance keeper of justice. William Shakespeare said it well in *The Merchant of Venice*, "But mercy is above this sceptered sway; It is enthroned in the hearts of kings, It is an attribute to God himself; And earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice."<sup>14</sup>

## Justice and Dignity

God cares about humanity. He makes that clear throughout the Bible. In Christ, that concept was made flesh “in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8, NASB). The great paradox of Christianity is this—we are the worst of sinners and the best of saints at the same time. At our worst, we call everyone else wicked; at our best, we recognize that we are not immune to such wickedness and that only Christ’s power can triumph over such a force.

Psalm 8 says that we, as human beings, are crowned with glory and honor. Inherent in that word *honor* is the concept of dignity, greatness, and majesty.<sup>15</sup> Dignity is innate within us simply because of who created us. When God created man in His image, human beings were set apart from the rest of creation. Humans are image bearers of the Triune God. This means that regardless of what one does in life—murder, steal, rape, manipulate, exploit, lie, etc.—that innate mirror does not go away. Though we all daily need spiritual Windex, that mirror, however foggy, is eternal.

C. S. Lewis said that *ordinary* cannot be an adjective that describes people. Neither can *mortal*. “It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit.”<sup>16</sup> We like to ride this truth as if it were a roller coaster. One day, we are bursting with pride and say we are chosen and we are princes. The next day, we feel as though we are paupers, and God does not care about our plight. It is crucial that we balance these two extremes.

Both truths—that we are of great worth and that we are the worst of sinners—come together to form a balanced perspective of our present reality. When we step outside the balance of either of these, we become dangerous Christians. Often, the economically poor will walk too closely to the negative extreme. Development practitioner Bryant Myers says, “A web of lies results in the poor internalizing a view of themselves as being without value and without a contribution to make, believing they are truly god-forsaken. ... Healing the marred identity of the poor is the beginning of transformation.”<sup>17</sup> On the other side of that equation is the economically rich, who often walk along pretending they aren’t just images of God, but that they *are* God. Through systems and as individuals, these people steal dignity away from the economically poor. “They seek to play god in the lives of the poor,” says Jayakumar Christian in his book *The God of the Empty-Handed*.<sup>18</sup> This, he says, is a god complex.

We must be wary of thinking that dignity equates to pride. It does not. Dignity and humility, with the right tension, create the perfect balance for us to see ourselves

as enormously in debt to our great Savior and simultaneously worthy because of the God-image that is inherently imprinted upon us. It is just to see every human being—including ourselves—through a lens of biblical dignity. As Christians, this is something we need to understand for our own well-being and the health of our communities, especially when we act out our faith in good deeds. In his book *Toxic Charity*, Robert Lupton says, “Attentive listening communicates worth; legitimate employment gives meaning to life; community gives a sense of belonging—all three enhance human dignity.”<sup>19</sup>

If Christ came to proclaim and bring justice, and dignity is a component of justice, then Christ proclaimed and brought dignity. If Christ was about that, we as Christ-followers must proclaim in word and deed a gospel that brings the good news of dignity. If our sermons and our actions are paternalistic, if our words come from a platform of pride, and if our deeds are done while undermining those we serve, we are not bringing true justice. For Christ did not preach from a platform of pride, and he did not undermine those he served.

Think of the adulterous woman in John 8 who was brought before a group of people who were ready to stone her. Christ, in fulfilling justice, brought dignity both to her accusers by reminding them that they were not sinless, and to her, by reminding her she was made in the image of God. He shows her true unconditional love in this profound act coupling it with the words, “Go, and sin no more.” True dignity comes from recognizing our paradoxical worth.

When I am full of pride, I need to be reminded that I am a sinner. That remembrance brings balance and ultimately brings dignity, just as it did with this woman’s accusers. When I am struggling with self worth, I need to be reminded that I have great value because of Christ’s redeeming blood. That remembrance brings balance and ultimately brings dignity, just as it did with this woman. In the midst of a recent ministry conflict, I found myself reacting in anger, over and over again, to the actions of another person. I kept praying that I would learn to react to the situation in a way that was pleasing to God. Psalm 4:4 was constantly on my mind as I didn’t want to suppress my anger, but I also did not want to sin in the midst of it. One morning, as I was fuming on the inside, I realized that my pride was preventing me from justly seeing this person. Several times as I heard more and more about what all had transpired, I thought, *I would never do that!* Ultimately, wrestling that thought brought me to the reality that I have done much worse in my life. There was a pedestal being fashioned and formed

in my mind with each thought of pride. The image of God innate within that person was being pummeled by my imaginary pedestal. Dignity came to me and to the situation when I was reminded of my own capabilities in the arena of sin. Justice—right relationships, and giving a person what is due—cannot happen without a balanced perspective of dignity that is innate in all human beings.

## Dehumanization

All injustices start with dehumanization. In fact, in my recent ministry struggle, I was dehumanizing the other person. It's even easier to do this among violators of human rights. Andrew and I lived about forty-five minutes outside of Monterrey, Mexico, at a time when the drug war was spreading into the city that was supposedly immune to it. The rumor we heard was that Monterrey was previously off limits because some head drug traffickers of the different gangs had homes in a prominent neighborhood in the city, and there was an unwritten rule between the different trafficking groups that peace was to reside in Monterrey. According to news reports, however, two cartels that had previously been allies turned against each other, one of which had controlled Monterrey, sparking battles in the industrial capital.<sup>20</sup> Other reports say that the U.S.'s demand for drugs and provision of weaponry along with political and law enforcement corruption that came to a head exposed Monterrey—only hours away from the U.S. border—to the war that had been raging in other regions of the country.<sup>21</sup> Worldly peace never lasts, and hangings began on the bridges of the city. First it was just brutal violence between the rival gangs. Then innocent bystanders were killed. The fear that had long hit *Regios* (Mexicans living in the Monterrey area) at an arm's distance—they had heard of things happening hours away in Durango, Sinaloa, and Mexico City—suddenly swelled inside their hearts, as the drug war struck neighbors and friends.

If we saw brand new SUVs driving around town, we were warned the owners might be drug traffickers. Andrew asked me to stop running outside because we had heard of women being abducted on the side of the road. In January 2013, eighteen members of a mariachi band were abducted, dismembered, and dumped into a well about three miles from our home.<sup>22</sup> I felt justified in my hatred-filled thoughts toward traffickers. But even those dark thoughts were pierced by the light of the gospel.

In one of my blog posts, I wrote:

*I have been doing to the drug traffickers exactly what I hate that they are doing; I dehumanize them for dehumanizing others. It seems to me that in order to continue acting in evil, one must take the emotion out of what one does. In order to kill and keep killing, the feelings of consequence have been sandpapered down so much that they barely exist. But you see, I do the same thing. When I think of these people and the evil acts they do, I dehumanize them. I think that they must be beasts. They must no longer have hearts. They must have closed off the emotions that correspond to their actions. It's pretty easy to close off my emotions toward them when I don't think they have emotions. We are all capable of murder, thievery, and greed. It is my faith in Christ that plays a tug of war with those evil desires that exist in us all.*

*And it is my faith in Christ that tells me two seemingly opposing truths: 1) I am a child of God, worthy of a most beautiful inheritance and 2) that I am on the same platform as a murderer and rapist. I am the worst sinner in need of redemption. It is too easy for me to hate these men. It's too easy for me to cast judgment on them. It's too easy to write them off as beasts and pretend whatever makes us humans no longer resides inside them. I must reject the easy thoughts of dehumanization, for they are the same thoughts that have brought those men to where they are. Working as a local reporter, I once wrote a feature story on a man who was caught up in the world of selling and doing drugs. He said the drug world will introduce a person to all kinds of evil. "You'll know people in crime and violence. You'll be plugged into everything bad, whether you like it or not."*

*It's just too easy to say I could never be that person. It's too easy to think that I would never walk such bad roads. But those thoughts are far from truth. And the only way this man got out was because another sober man looked him in the face and told him hope was waiting for him. It is too easy not to pray for evil men. Too easy to say it's pointless. But if we take a good look at our own lives in light of Christ, we realize prayer can never be pointless, even in its most elementary form. And aren't we told to pray for our enemies? So I try a bit harder now to pray for those men who do evil deeds, in hopes that someone somewhere is praying for the evil inside of me. I pray they will feel the consequences of their actions. I pray they will recognize there is still hope for them, no matter what they have done. I pray they will know redemption, and that my life will portray it.*



This is not easy to swallow. I struggle with it. When I hear about ISIS attacks, child abusers, and human traffickers, I want to throw my Christianity aside and take revenge. But, if I give way to my flesh, I could justify my own violence against violators of human rights. If I choose to ignore what Psalm 4:4 says and allow my anger to direct my actions, I become a perpetrator myself. Christ offers the best response for me to mimic when he says, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." Those words haunt me.

In his book *Strength to Love*, Martin Luther King Jr. says this about the Supreme Court justices who decided that African Americans could not be American citizens in 1857: "The justices who rendered this decision were not wicked men. But they were victims of spiritual and intellectual blindness. They knew not what they did. The whole system of slavery was largely perpetuated by sincere though spiritually ignorant people."<sup>23</sup> King, who lived his life and lost it reversing this perspective, was able to say that these men were "not wicked, but blind." Christ and King saw their enemies as morally blind, which is how they were able to respond differently than my flesh wants to respond. These were not merely enemies that body-checked them in a soccer game, flipped them off on the interstate, or called them lazy at the PTA meeting. These were enemies that physically abused them, enemies that threatened their lives regularly, and ultimately enemies who took their lives. "There will be no permanent solution to the race problem until oppressed men develop the capacity to love their enemies," says King. He adds that if we are going to go by the name Christians, we are not allowed to be intellectually and morally blind. "Intellectual and moral blindness is a dilemma that man inflicts upon himself by his tragic misuse of freedom and his failure to use his mind to its fullest capacity. One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right if the head is totally wrong."<sup>24</sup>

When Christ admonishes us to set the oppressed free, those of us in the business of social justice stand up ready and willing. But when Christ tells us to open the eyes of the blind, we think, *Well, we are not in the business of healing. We'll leave that to those who are.* Maybe Christ is talking about the intellectually and morally blind inasmuch as he is talking about the physically blind; which means, he who seeks social justice, must seek to heal both oppressed *and* oppressor. I must be honest, seeking healing for oppressors makes me uncomfortable.

Paulo Freire says something similar to King's words above in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.<sup>25</sup>

It takes immense amounts of self-control and discipline to fight the temptation to oppress, regardless if our outward label is oppressor, oppressed, or a bystander looking on to the oppression. Restoring humanity is the opposite of dehumanization. Christ called both oppressors (tax collectors) and the oppressed (fishermen) to become his disciples. He ate with the rich and fed the poor. He worked to redeem humanity in all its forms by forgiving sins, healing physical ailments, and challenging those around him to do what seemed impossible; that is, go sin no more, go sell all you have and give to the poor, go love your God with all your being, and go make disciples of all nations.

Restoring humanity involves both individual redemptive justice and systematic redemptive justice. When Jesus spoke to individuals and to groups like the Pharisees and the masses, he challenged individuals and he challenged the systems of his time. I am reminded of my friends who work for International Justice Mission, a global non-profit that works to protect the poor from violence. While the organization has done a great job in individual redemptive justice, they are also working toward broadening their focus to systematic redemption. For every innocent man in jail that they are able to set free through tireless persistency, there is another innocent man who will take the first one's place until the system is redeemed. For every girl that is saved from sex trafficking, another enters into it. Redemption is needed not only in individual lives, but also in systems and cycles, infrastructures, and societal norms.

Usually, those cyclical infrastructural injustices can ignite a sense of righteous anger. But that can only take us so far. Anger is an emotion, and just like all emotions, it can lead us down two possible paths: either we let it take us to its extreme or we take it to the bone-and-marrow divider and let the truth turn it into a step closer to kingdom come. For the same reason that we should abstain from getting drunk on alcohol, we cannot let ourselves get drunk with anger or hatred. For a drunk man is a blind man, and we cannot heal the blind with blindness. Blindness breeds more blindness, just as violence produces more violence and justice more justice.

When victims of injustice actively choose not to respond in anger, it is a clear sign of the gospel in effect on earth. When Michael Brown was unjustly shot dead in Ferguson, Missouri, his father Brown Sr. condemned violence as a response. He said, "Hurting others or destroying property is not the answer. ...I do not want my son's death to be in vain. I want it to lead to incredible change, positive change, change that makes the St. Louis region better for everyone."<sup>26</sup>

## Contextual Justice

There are no formulas for calculating justice, and that makes the process messy and lengthy. Justice is the act of practicing the rightness of God on Earth. Justice involves making the future kingdom of heaven a present reality. Jesus prays for His father's kingdom to come and will to be done on Earth as it is in heaven. When Jesus healed, He did it as the Spirit moved. The same result came from different processes. Jesus healed the centurion's servant with words, though he never had a physical connection with him. One woman touched Christ's robe and was healed. Another man received sight after Jesus led him outside of his village, spit in some dirt, and then rubbed that mud on his eyes. Even so, the man's sight wasn't healed immediately; at first, he faintly sees men as trees and then sees everything clearly. When Jesus talked intimately with people, it was done differently. What works to redeem you in your life might not work the same in mine. And what worked to redeem you when you were ten years old may not work when you are fifty. Context matters. Love is elastic, and we must give it the freedom to be so.

If, as Wolterstorff suggests, justice and love fit together like hand and glove, and love is flexible, justice must also be so. This is hard to accept. Science is easier. Science will tell us that power equals work divided by time. Every time. But justice has no set formula. Justice's power might take years to yield results, but sometimes, it will take days. We have to be flexible with it, allowing God to do what he needs to in each circumstance, without making our plans for Him. If we force a formula upon justice, we reduce its power and its beauty.

When we only look at our circumstances with our physical eyes, we fall into the trap of thinking only scientifically. It's hard to renew our minds regularly when we box in what life should look like. Currently, my family is living on too little money. Our

physical eyes tell us that Andrew needs a better job and Gena needs to get *any* job because our cultural scientific formula is money = happiness. So far, my job options are slim pickings, and would involve both of us being away from our children the majority of the day. When we look only with physical eyes, we see resumes that should have more experience, bank accounts that should have more savings, and a house that should have more finished projects. But when we look with our spiritual eyes, we see that a 5-year-old coffee shop ministry in northern Mexico is still thriving, despite the financial strain it can be on our super tight budget. We see time as just as big of a currency as money, and we see our 4-year-old son's character as a wonderful return on investment. This is my context here and now. This is the context I must seek justice in. Your context might look quite similar. It might look very different. Maybe Jesus is walking you outside your village to help you find wholeness. Maybe you are being lowered through a roof by a group of friends to find wholeness. Maybe you are a stay at home mom. Maybe you work a boring nine-to-five. Maybe you are living in a nursing home. Maybe you are hiding behind a horse stable running from human traffickers. Wherever you are at, seeking justice is possible.

In her book *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey says, "[Many Christians] give cognitive assent to the great truths of Scripture, but they make their practical, day-to-day decisions based on what they can see, hear, measure, and calculate."<sup>27</sup> Maybe our daily decisions are weighted too heavily based on our culture and not on scripture. Christ's kingdom seems upside down to us: a king is born in a stinky stable, the first will be last, the greatest is the least. In this kingdom, it's never about who is deserving in the story. We are called to bring that kingdom to this Earth and rearrange our minds, so we see Christ's kingdom as the norm and our own earthly kingdom as backward. This means seeing with spiritual eyes first, just like the blind man who first saw men like trees (see Psalm 1 and Jeremiah 17). And this means listening with spiritual ears, because our spirits are naturally aligned with that upside down kingdom. Pearcey says, "It means we sometimes act in ways that seem irrational ... to those who see only the physical world. It means we do what is right, even at great cost, because we are convinced that what we gain in the unseen realm is far greater than what we lose from a worldly perspective."<sup>28</sup>

We must make justice a lifestyle. Lifestyles are not formulaic, neither are relationships. We must first have a right relationship with the God of justice in order to mimic His ways in loving humanity.

## Justice as a Component of Shalom

This upside down kingdom is both a present and future reality. In John 10:10, Jesus says he came so that we would have abundant life. When Jesus prayed his most famous prayer, he said, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” (Matthew 6:10, ESV). The *on earth* part of that is something Robert Linthicum calls the *shalom community*, which he says the book of Deuteronomy describes in detail. Linthicum says:

Shalom is an exceedingly rich concept, a comprehensive word dealing with and covering all the relationships of daily life, expressing the ideal state of life in Israel and, indeed, the entire world. The concept of shalom essentially encompasses what the Israelites saw as being foundational to life: being in community with each other. ... So when Jews wish each other “shalom,” they are wishing for each other health, security, long life, prosperity, successful completion of an enterprise, victory in war. In other words, they are wishing God’s best for the entirety of a person’s life, for all her relationships with others, for all he sets his hand to do. And they are wishing for such fullness both for that person’s life and for the Jewish community throughout the world.<sup>29</sup>

What does justice have to do with shalom? If shalom is the ideal state of community and justice is the ideal state of relationships, then justice will automatically lead to shalom, and shalom will not be possible without justice. Wolterstorff says it like this in his 1981 Kuyper Lectures, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*:

If individuals are not granted what is due them, if their claim on others is not acknowledged by those others, if others do not carry out their obligations to them, then shalom is wounded. That is so even if there are no *feelings* of hostility between them and the others. Shalom cannot be secured in an unjust situation by managing to get all concerned to feel content with their lot in life. Shalom would not have been present *even if* all the blacks in the United States had been content in their state of slavery; it would not be present in South Africa *even if* all the blacks there felt happy. It is because shalom is an ethical community that it is wounded when justice is absent.<sup>30</sup>

Bringing justice into a situation is the first step in leading a community toward shalom. Whether we are talking about family life, nonprofit work, church work, or living Christ-like in a secular environment, we must carry with us this idea that abundant life is possible, both now and in eternity. This call to justice is not just one for individual Christians. It is a call for the Church as a whole. When an individual sees justice biblically and seeks it out, the first steps of abundant life happen for him. But a community is stronger than an individual, and a community keeps an individual on course through encouragement, affirmation, and accountability.

In his book *Walking With the Poor*, Myers says:

People who are reading and living the word under the discipling of the Holy Spirit should be a significant source of inspiration and perspiration working for life and shalom. When the church is its best, it is a sign of the values of the kingdom and is contributing holistic disciples to the community for its well-being.<sup>31</sup>

When churches see justice biblically and seek it out, abundant life happens for a community. When churches become shalom communities, they take part in their divine role as the bride of Christ. This is why I have written this book, because I want to see the American Church become a shalom community that seeks justice, especially in its charitable deeds. I want to see the Church create shalom in Jerusalem, its own neighborhood; Judea, its own nation; and to the ends of the earth, wherever its feet may go in the world. Throughout these pages, I urge you to explore these concepts and questions with me and with your community so that we can seek shalom together.

Romans 14:17 (ESV and OJB) says, “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness [tzedek] peace [shalom] and joy in the Holy Spirit.” When we begin to see justice as the Bible declares it to be, we are more equipped to take up Christ’s call to faithfully bring forth justice. We must encourage, admonish, and hold each other accountable, so that we do not grow faint or get discouraged till God has established justice in the earth.