

# CONTENTS

Introduction 9

## **PART ONE: WHAT IS JUSTICE?**

- 1. The Starting Point for Justice 19
- 2. The Role of Man in Justice 29

## **PART TWO: WHY IS JUSTICE ELUSIVE?**

- 3. The Legislative Reason: We Make Unjust Laws 41
- 4. The Cognitive Reason: We Have Limited Knowledge 53
- 5. The Spiritual Reason: We Have Darkened Understanding 63
- 6. The Neurological Reason: We Have Implicit Bias 75

## **PART THREE: HOW SHOULD WE DO JUSTICE?**

- 7. The Enduring Divine Requirement 93
- 8. Doing Justice in the Political Arena 99
- 9. Doing Justice in the Public Arena 111
- 10. Doing Justice in the Personal Arena 119

## **PART FOUR: WILL WE EVER SEE JUSTICE?**

- 11. The Reign of the Just King 127
- 12. The Verdict of the Righteous Judge 139

Afterword 151

Resources 155

Notes 159

Acknowledgments 167



## CHAPTER 1

# THE STARTING POINT FOR JUSTICE

**W**hen the latest Star Wars movie released over the 2015 Christmas holidays, I went to see it at the local theater with several members of my family. Since I live in urban, downtown Chicago, we walked to a theater near Michigan Avenue. After the movie, as we were stepping back outside, I heard loud voices. I followed the sound and almost ran into a crowd of approximately two hundred people—surrounded by nearly as many police officers—marching down the center of Michigan Avenue.

“Sixteen shots! Sixteen shots!” they chanted. I knew immediately what the protest was about. Chicago had recently erupted over the release of a video from October 2014 that showed a police officer killing an unarmed, African American teenager—Laquan MacDonald—by shooting him sixteen times. The marching crowd was peaceful but focused. As they pressed down the street, they held signs demanding, *We Want Justice!*

But what is justice?

If I had polled the protestors and asked them what justice they desired, I would have received many different answers. Some would want a lengthy prison term for the guilty police officer.

Some would want capital punishment. Some would want to overthrow the Chicago power structure.

The protestors marched together. They cried out in unison. But their demands for justice would mean many different outcomes.

## THE WRONG STARTING POINT

How can ten different people come to ten different answers on what is just in a situation?

Why is there not complete agreement?

**How can ten different people come to ten different answers on what is just in a situation?**

*They have the wrong starting point.* Even from the days of the ancient Greek philosophers (like Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates), the starting point of justice has been man. Definitions of justice abounded among the ancients, but they inevitably included ideas of fairness, equality, honesty, and equity. For example, Aristotle said, “Justice consists in what is lawful and fair, with fairness involving

equitable distributions and the correction of what is inequitable.”<sup>1</sup>

Through the centuries philosophers have debated the same themes, creating their own flavors of justice. John Locke argued that justice started with the protection of people’s natural rights.<sup>2</sup> But who determines this list of rights? What if states—or countries—disagree on the list? We had this problem in America when the North and the South disagreed on the justice of slavery. In such a situation, who arbitrates?

John Stuart Mill took a utilitarian approach, suggesting that

justice consists of the equal opportunities offered to people.<sup>3</sup> But is it inherently unjust to not have wealth distributed equally to all people? Abraham, Job, David, Solomon, and many others in the Bible were wealthy people. They prospered more than others. Was this unjust?

Other examples could be mentioned, but my purpose is not to review all the theories of justice ever proposed. My point is to show the flaw of starting a discussion on justice with man. Start with man and you end at varying conceptions of justice.

## THE RIGHT STARTING POINT

The correct starting point of justice must be—and can only be—*God*. To gain a right understanding of justice, we must explore the relationship between three of His attributes—holiness, righteousness, and justice.

Holiness stands at the center; it is God's attribute that sets Him apart from all of His creation. That God is holy means He is intrinsically pure, without sin, free from any moral blemish, and has an "otherness" to His being. Holiness is not part of who God is; it's all of who God is. Tozer once said, "Holy is the way God is. To be holy He does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite, incomprehensible fullness of purity that is incapable of being other than it is. Because He is holy, all His attributes are holy."<sup>4</sup>

God repeatedly reveals himself in the Bible as the Holy One. In the Law of Moses He said, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). David ascribes holiness to God in the Psalms when he writes, "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (Ps. 22:3). The revelation given to John shows

how God is worshipped for His holiness; the four living creatures before His throne never cease to say, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8).

Righteousness and justice are closely linked to God’s holiness and can be considered two sides to the same coin. We can’t speak of one without speaking of the other. The Hebrew word for *righteousness* literally means “straight” or “right.” That which is righteous is straight, as opposed to crooked.

I studied architecture in undergraduate school. Before the days of computer-aided design, we drew everything with pencil on paper. To ensure that my lines were straight, I had a T square, or a straight edge. In that sense my T square was “righteous,” unlike a stick found in my yard, which would inevitably be crooked or “unrighteous.”

To say God is righteous is to say that God is straight, right, and conforming to a standard. What is that standard? His holiness—His sinless and pure moral character. Where is that standard revealed? In His Word.

God is righteous, and He cannot and will not violate His holy character. King David makes this clear in one of his most beautiful psalms: “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are *right*, rejoicing the heart” (Ps. 19:7–8a).

David says that the Word of God is right. He also says it is righteous: “The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and *righteous* altogether” (Ps. 19:9). God’s Word perfectly reflects His holy and righteous character.

Justice is closely related to God’s righteousness; it is the outworking of that righteousness. God is just in that He requires us to conform to His righteousness and holiness. If we do so, He justly rewards us. If we don’t, He justly punishes us.

The Bible shows us how God can never be guilty of injustice. In Genesis 18 an angel of the Lord tells Abraham that God is going to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's nephew, Lot, lives in the city of Sodom. The two cities were famous for their sexual depravity. Our term *sodomy* remains in use more than four thousand years later as a reminder of the violent homosexual activity present in those cities.

When God reveals these plans to Abraham, we might expect Abraham to respond with relief and righteous indignation, since he is aware of Sodom and Gomorrah's wickedness. But he doesn't. He asks God a series of questions, probing His justice. He asks, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?" (Gen. 18:23–24).

Abraham is asking, "Is this right? Is this just? Yes, I know the wicked deserve to be punished, but it is right to punish the righteous along with them?"

I remember in junior high when our entire math class was forced to stay after school because someone in the class was misbehaving when the teacher's back was turned. I recognize that teaching math to a class of squirrely preadolescents can be worse than solitary confinement at San Quentin, but I also remember thinking that the sweeping detention didn't seem right. One person was guilty—but we were all being punished.

This is Abraham's point. He knows that God will not act unjustly. "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you!" (Gen. 18:25a).

Abraham then drives the truth home: "Shall not the Judge

of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:25b). He asks a rhetorical question. Can the just Judge act unjustly? The answer is, of course, no. The Judge of the entire earth cannot act unjustly, because He is righteous. He will never do anything that is not right, just, and holy.

The relationship between these three attributes of God can be summarized like this:

- God is holy—*He is the moral standard.*
- God is righteous—*He conforms to the moral standard.*
- God is just—*He requires His creatures to likewise conform to the moral standard.*

## WHAT IS JUSTICE?

**Without a righteous standard of measurement, we can believe certain actions are straight when they are crooked.**

If you have followed my argument so far, the reason different views of justice exist is obvious. Without a righteous standard of measurement, we can believe certain actions are straight when they are crooked.

My father worked in the lumber business for forty years, and I gained my first employment as a teenager at his company. During my years there, one of my duties was helping customers select their lumber. Professional contractors know how to lift up the edge of a stud, eyeball its edge, and see whether or not it was straight. Other people didn't have a clue. For them any board was straight, even

if it was so crooked it could be used as a ski.

This variance in discernment is our dilemma when we start the pursuit of justice with man. Without a straight edge for a standard, anything and everything will look straight to somebody. That is not justice.

At most it's the appearance of justice. *Justice is the application of God's righteous moral standards to the conduct of man.* It starts with God, not man.

**Justice is the application of God's righteous moral standards to the conduct of man. It starts with God, not man.**

## THE PURPOSE OF JUSTICE

If justice has its starting point with God and not with man, then the purpose of justice is determined by God, not man. To this end, we must also deal with two popular but wrong perceptions of why we enforce justice.

1. *The purpose of justice is not to reform or rehabilitate an offender.* In a man-centered justice system, reformation is often one of the goals. I don't deny reformation can and does occur, and I affirm that such life change can dramatically reduce recidivism. I also applaud the work of Prison Fellowship and other jail ministries that bring the gospel and powerful discipleship to incarcerated men and women. But reformation, while important, is not the purpose of a God-centered justice system.

2. *The purpose of justice is not to suppress crime.* In a man-centered system we generally assume the removal of criminals from society serves to warn others and also makes day-to-day life better on our streets. Potential criminals are deterred, and we feel safer.

This may indeed be true, but this misunderstands the purpose of justice.

Biblical justice is about sin's affront to God's holiness. Since sin falls short of our God's righteous standards, our holy God must punish sin. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). God is angry about sin, and His justice requires Him to rightly punish sinners.

Jesus took sin's punishment for believers. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). God's justice is perfectly satisfied by Jesus' work on the cross. While we were once stained by sin, thanks to Christ's atoning work God can now declare us righteous. When we sin we experience His discipline as a Father, which is restorative and redemptive. But that's not the purpose of justice.

If incarceration causes potential offenders to veer from sin and creates a safer society, those are welcome side benefits. If the threat of punishment leads some to pursue what is right and that results in quiet, tranquil communities, everyone wins. But the reduction of crime is not the purpose of justice. The purpose of justice is to uphold God's holy righteousness.

## **GOD'S IMPARTIAL JUSTICE**

As fallen human beings we are deeply prone to partiality. I will dig into this in later chapters, but it bears mentioning here. Partiality is not new to the church; James spoke against it in his epistle: "My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (2:1). James then contrasts how a wealthy man dressed in designer duds is treated when entering the

church versus a poor man in rags. Decisions are made based solely on each man's external appearance.

The context in James is partiality and judging in the church, but we all know that partiality is not limited to the assembly on Sunday. It happens on the streets of our cities, in the courtrooms across our country, and in every place where people mix. People are partial. I am. You are.

The encouraging word is that God is not partial. He is holy. He is righteous. He is the impartial Judge! While we quickly judge a person by external appearances, God is no respecter of persons. While we may be swayed by a person's position or prestige, God will not. If God were susceptible to partiality, we would expect Him to be favorable to the Jews—they are His chosen people. But Paul gives us these plain words: "For God shows no partiality" (Rom. 2:11).

Every person—without exception—stands on level ground before God's throne. R. C. Sproul puts it this way: "God does not respond to bribes or hear only the cases of the rich and powerful. He does not allow Lady Justice to peek from beneath her blindfold. . . . His scales are in balance."<sup>5</sup>

In our world the scales of justice are imbalanced. The hundreds of protestors who marched through Chicago chanting "Sixteen shots!" felt the scales were tipped against their community. At the time of writing, the Chicago court system was still sorting it all out. And I pray that justice is served. Yet until we orient our definition of justice to God's standard, we are left to measure with crooked sticks, which gets us nowhere.

Justice must begin with God. Only then can we start understanding our place in His justice.