

Justice

So much of the Bible deals with justice and injustice. Justice is a component of goodness. These things are two feathers on the same bird. They can't be achieved independently. For example, in order for God to be a good God, He must also be a just God. As God is always just, His people should always be just. It's a requirement. When it comes to fighting injustice, Christians should always be on the front lines. Micah 6:8, ***"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*** Let's focus on the first of these three commands given here, ***"do justice."*** This is a command to act. Do it! Don't simply be *for* justice - do justice!

Look at how seriously Job understood God's expectations that he was to be a person of justice. Job says the following in Job 29:14-17, ***"My justice was like a robe and a turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I investigated the case which I did not know. I broke the jaws of the wicked and snatched the prey from his teeth."*** Job models that justice is shown in a variety of ways, and is the responsibility of God's people.

In the New Testament's book of Acts, we turn our attention to the city of Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul was about to experience some serious injustice. The injustice would come from a city of people who actually boasted of their justice and goodness. Setting the stage for what's about to happen, Paul had been traveling and ministering to Jews and Gentiles in various countries. Meanwhile, Jews back in Jerusalem had heard false reports about Paul, which we read about in Acts 21:20-21, where Paul was wrongly slandered as, ***"teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."*** Basically, Paul had been misrepresented as being anti-Jew. Now, while in Jerusalem, other apostles are warning Paul about the impending trouble that he will face here as the citizens learn of Paul's presence, as we see in verse 22, ***"What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come."***

The apostles have a solution to win over the crowd so that they would understand Paul's heart and consider the real message the Paul was preaching. The solution was that Paul is to join with four other men who were currently under a Nazarite vow. A Nazarite vow, as seen in Numbers 6:1-21, was a period of time when a person separated himself from normal practices, and yielded himself before the Lord in a more intense manner. It represented a type of purification where a person was unable to drink wine or eat grapes, nor shave any hair on their head, nor touch any dead things. Paul knew these conditions held no spiritual value, but as long as nothing compromised any doctrine of the Lord's, Paul condescended to it, in order to win the favor of the Jews he wanted to minister to. Paul reasoned that, ***"To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews,"*** 1 Corinthians 9:20.

Reading on in Acts 21:23-26, Paul agreed to join these four men already under the vow, and he completes it with them. On the appropriate day, they all went to the temple to signify the completion of the days of purification. Paul paid the necessary offering expenses, and all the men's heads were shaved as a mark of their completion. Priests would then declare their vow satisfied. Hopefully now the Jews would see Paul as kin, and certainly not anti-Jewish. But, did this strategy work?

Acts 21:27-28 shows how Paul's attempts at pacifying the Jews had failed, and now a violent attempt at destroying Paul and his ministry are about to be underway. ***"When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our***

people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." Let's unpack what's happening here. **"When the seven days were almost over,"** speaks of the vow Paul was under, almost coming to full-completion, and Paul is still in the temple until such a time. **"Jews from Asia,"** refer to Jews that had encountered Paul through his travels in Asia, who are now here in Jerusalem to observe the feast of Pentecost. These aren't Jewish converts to Christianity, but rigid Jews who had rejected the gospel and had followed Paul before; shaming him and attempting to smear his ministry so as to keep other Jews from considering Paul's message. As is often the case, when certain groups have an agenda, they shut down the speech of any message that's contrary.

Injustice starts when there's an agenda.

Free-speech was not a popular thing in Jerusalem. If you had a message that the Jews hated, they'd run you out of town or kill you for blasphemy. These Jews from Asia **"began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him."** Instead of seeking justice through the legal system, like taking Paul to the High Priest, or the Sanhedrin, and bringing official charges against him, they instead seek "mob justice" and incite a crowd against Paul. People with agendas don't tend to follow proper channels of civility. Besides, going to the Jewish authorities would mean that they'd have to provide evidence, and they had none. But there's no need to bring evidence to the court of public opinion. We see that tactic today with so many slanders in the media. Choosing to disregard legal channels, these men **"lay hands on him,"** and use violence.

Injustice spreads by creating mania.

One easy way to create mania is to appeal to one's patriotism or ethnicity. This is what we see here. **"Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."** In other words, they cry out, **"If you're a real Jew, that has a concern for the temple and your country, now is your time to prove it, as this man is an enemy of all that we believe in!"** Grab the heartstrings of a crowd, and you can control them like a puppet. We see this often in the media today; a 5-second video clip with no context, and the internet mob is thrown into a fit. Quick and impassioned decision making is a bad thing.

Injustice is governed by passion, not reason.

We are commanded by God to be governed by reason. Look at the false charges, claiming that Paul preaches **"everywhere against our people and the Law and this place."** The reality is that Paul taught that Jews and Gentiles were on the same level before God. Jews, on the other hand, taught that they were superior to Gentiles, so the idea of equality was an abomination. Paul's accusers continue by saying, **"and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."** **For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple."** Engraved on the gate to the inner court was the following inscription in full-display, **"Only purified Jewish men could enter, under penalty of death."** The accusers here make a massive false-assumption, that Paul had brought Trophimus, a Gentile, into the temple. Trophimus, who was a Gentile convert to Christianity, never entered into the inner grounds of the temple with Paul. But, because Paul and Trophimus were observed together in the streets, and since Paul was in the inner-courts, the assumption was made that they entered the inner courts together.

Injustice happens when assumptions are made.

Inciting the crowd had worked and the mob was enraged. Verse 30 says, ***“Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.”*** Here, street-justice has taken over; rashness is ruling. Humans are inclined to anything unrestrained, subversive, and outrageous. When people have little holiness themselves, they are quick to rash emotional reactions. Verse 31 shows the degree of madness that has taken over, ***“While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.”*** The crowd was responding to the death notification posted on the entrance to the inner courts of the temple – let a Gentile in and be killed! The crazy thing is that the mob would prefer to kill Paul rather than confirm if the charges were true. ***“The doors were shut,”*** by the Levites, who officiated this area of the temple; showing Paul was unfit for this place, and so that Paul couldn’t go in for refuge. This allowed the Jews to kill Paul in better conscience without defiling the holy place.

Injustice results from acting first and thinking later.

The mayhem drew the attention of the Roman military. Rome held sway over everything in Jerusalem, as Israel was enslaved by the Roman Empire at this time. Verses 32-33 say, ***“At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done.”*** Notice how the military commander, a man named Lysias (Acts 24:7), responds to the upheaval and arrests Paul without any interrogation, putting him in double chains (chained between two soldiers) as if Paul was a violent aggressor, even though when the commander reached the scene, it was Paul who was being beaten. The commander was rash, in part from a desire to appease the mob, and in part because if he couldn’t squelch any local upheaval, word could reach a higher Roman authority, and result in serious consequences for this commander. After all, Lysias was still on the lookout for a certain Egyptian man who had caused an uprising a while ago, and he would do anything to avoid another revolt. Ultimately, he would arrest Paul first and ask questions later.

Injustice is accelerated by peer-pressure.

Verse 34, ***“But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.”*** Now, with Paul doubly bound, Lysias sees fit to get to the bottom of things, but there was such a division in the crowd, that Lysias couldn’t get a proper read on what was truly going on. There seemed to be two sides trying to out-shout the other, and the result was simply an ***“uproar.”***

Injustice happens when dialogue is not allowed.

Verses 35-38, ***“When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, “Away with him!” As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?”*** Paul is unable to be on his own two feet, and must be carried because of the violent rush of the crowd seeking to kill Paul. They pick Paul up and lift him in the air, lest the mob tear him to pieces or take a knife to him. Finally, onto the stairs leading up to the entrance of the barracks, where the crowd wouldn’t dare go, Paul is able to get a word in, and here he cleverly speaks to Lysias using Greek language. ***“May I say something to you?”*** Polite and well-mannered, showing that he’s not

the aggressor that Lysias had assumed him to be, Paul surprises the commander, who responds back, ***“Do you know Greek?”*** Lysias is caught off guard by Paul’s ability to speak Greek. Lysias says, ***“Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt.”***

A little evidence changes the situation.

In verse 39, Paul was able to clarify who he was, telling the commander, ***“I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.”*** Paul was an ethnic Jew, born to Jewish parents who possessed Roman citizenship. This meant that Paul was a Roman citizen; a very important detail that would come into play later. It should be noted that natural born citizens of Rome had rights within the Roman Empire that other Israelites didn’t have. For example, later in Acts 22:29, Lysias become terrified upon learning that Paul was a Roman citizen. He’s terrified for his own safety because Lysias had bound Paul in chains, and Roman citizens can’t be chained without due process. The consequence of doing so was severe. But, here now, on the steps of the barracks, Paul only reveals his Jewish identity, hoping that doing so affords him the chance to speak to the Jewish crowd and clear the air.

Verse 40 says, ***“When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect.”*** Learning that Paul was not the Egyptian revolutionary, Paul is given permission to speak to the crowd. Though bound between two soldiers, Paul is able to lift his hand enough so as to silence the crowd. What a difference a little reason creates; now Paul is standing on two feet, the soldiers are obliging him, and the violent crowd is still and silent.

Here’s an overview of the events that follow. Paul preaches about Jesus and shares his testimony, to which the Jews couldn’t deny his transformation. The man some of them knew before, as the zealous Pharisee who hated followers of Jesus, is now preaching that Jesus is the only way! However, once Paul says that God called him to preach to the Gentiles, the crowd erupts, ***“Kill him.”*** Paul is taken away for further interrogation by Lysias; to be ***“examined by scourging.”*** This was a torture tactic used with slaves, and was unnecessary as Paul was telling the truth. Before the scourging starts, Paul wisely reveals his Roman citizenship. The soldiers panic, as unjustly scourging a Roman would mean their own death! Commander Lysias inquires of Paul’s citizenship; something he should have confirmed already. Upon learning that Paul was a citizen of Rom, now the commander too is fearful because he had unjustly put Paul in chains. Lysias unbounds Paul and orders that the Jewish Sanhedrin assemble the next day in order that they have a just deliberation regarding accusations against Paul. The only reason Lysias turned Paul over to the Sanhedrin was based on self-preservation; Lysias puts Paul’s arrest on their heads now, hoping to escape notice that he’d unjustly held Paul in chains up to this point. Fear of getting into trouble ourselves shouldn’t be the reason we finally seek truth and justice.

Applications

Do justice! This is always a good thing, and for many reasons. A significant reason is that justice creates civility. Additionally, all Christians should be governed by reason. We should always put aside agendas and seek objective truth. Justice must be afforded to those who have wronged us. Bear in mind that due process is also commanded in scripture.

Social Justice

Definitions for social justice will vary depending on who you ask. For the sake of this essay, let me define social justice as petitioning for equality of opportunity. As I’ve expressed earlier, it’s critical that Christians

fight for justice and be on the front lines of these efforts. In recent years we've seen a massive rise in the amount of social justice causes; some are healthy and appropriate, like the equality of opportunity regardless of race or gender. Others are subversive with the aim of convincing society to adopt standards that are Biblically immoral/unethical, such as transgenderism or the rights of children over their parents. Amidst a growing trend that insists that everyone "*take a side*", Christians need to be cautious before they rally their support. Critical thinking must first be used and Biblical principles must be applied.

I believe a weakness in the church today is that social justice has become the new "gospel" for many so-called Christians. What I mean is, many who profess Christ are satisfied putting their time and energy into social justice causes, yet without any evangelical ministry being factored in. Their activism doesn't involve the mention of Jesus, salvation, forgiveness, grace, mercy, or the fellowship of the church. This kind of believer thinks they're fulfilling their ministry purpose by simply being a social justice warrior, thinking that being for or against a cause is God's plan for them in living out their faith. Again, the church should be the tip of the spear when the fight is against injustice, but the motivation must be evangelical, gospel centric, and Christ-honoring. These must be the driving motivations, not merely social reform, as social reform does not necessarily mean that one is promoting truth.