



THE MANDATE FOR JUSTICE (Fall 1987)

By James W. Skillen

Is talking about a biblical mandate for Christians to do justice anything more than idealistic rhetoric? After all, isn't the reality of politics and of a law practice little more than the struggle to keep the worst from happening, an effort to mediate and accommodate differences so that the parties each get a little of what they want? We might want justice, but justice will only come with the return of Christ. Is there any reason for working toward justice now?

Contrary to the arguments of idealists and realists, I strongly believe that God's mandate to do justice, and not simply to wish for it, is an integral part of the daily Christian life. When Jesus told His followers, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20), He was directing them to pursue justice.

Jesus Christ has the authority to give this command because He is not merely a private household god. He did not retreat into the heavens (or the grave) as a defeated idealist leaving us to remember Him as a great teacher of private ethics or as one who might attain public importance at some later date in history. Jesus is Lord and King now. As the One who conquered sin and calls us to be joint heirs in His kingdom, He demands justice. Obedience to Christ requires more than private love and honesty among family members, church members and nearby neighbors. We who support the government with our taxes and votes cannot ignore the fact that public laws will always be either just or unjust—never neutral—and that we bear some responsibility for whether they are just or unjust.

When I speak of God's command to do justice, I am speaking of something more than mere ethical responsibility. Treating our neighbors justly is not something we do in addition to knowing God or alongside our communion with God. Rather, doing justice in public as well as in private is an inextricable part of being in fellowship with God and knowing Him.

This concept was illustrated when the prophet Jeremiah delivered a word from God to Shallum, son of Josiah. Shallum followed his father as king of Judah, and through Jeremiah God condemned him

for perpetrating great injustice: "Did not your father Josiah have food and drink? He did what was right and just, so all went well with him. He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the Lord." (Jeremiah 22:15-16). Thus, for a king to know God meant being in accord with God's command to do justice. God is saying that if we fail to do justice we do not know Him.

Thankfully, the good news of Christ Jesus is that His righteousness, not ours, saves us. Christ's call to do justice is not self-saving. The only way that our righteousness can surpass that of the Pharisees is if we become robed with Christ's righteousness. The only way we can love and serve our neighbors is if Christ's love pours through us to them. We cannot manufacture justice out of our own goodness, nor can we save ourselves through good deeds. The simple message of the gospel is true for all of life, including politics. We are enabled to serve God and our neighbors only because God first loved us in Christ Jesus.

To enter into the new life that Christ alone can give necessitates becoming His disciple. Then, if we are to live as His disciples, we must learn to obey Him in all things. Thus, the pursuit of justice is an essential part of Christian discipleship. To ignore this call is not merely to fail in loving our neighbors, it is also to endanger our very relationship with Christ. To pretend to love God in Christ without constantly repenting of sin and turning to obey His commands is, according to John, to live as a liar (John 2:3-6). Jesus himself insisted, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21).

God did not give us the option to do justice; rather, pursuing justice must be a hallmark of our lives. As we work in the give-and-take world of American law and politics, we cannot ignore the realities before us, but we should also remember that God and His mandates are realities of far greater weight than anything else we encounter in our daily work. It is to Him that we must ultimately "give account" (Hebrews 4:13). The commands to love God, serve our neighbors and

do justice all go together. Encouraging one another to fulfill these commands is far more than idealistic rhetoric; it is one step toward being in the world but not of it.

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