

Scriptures About Justice

All Scripture passages are in the NRSV translation.

Some have argued that social justice has no real place in Christianity and that this was never a part of Jesus' teaching or ministry. The Scriptures below (which only begin to scratch the surface of all the passages in the Bible that pertain to social justice) show that this was an important aspect to Judaism, which of course was the tradition from which Jesus and Christianity comes, as well as Jesus and early Christianity. Before looking at these passages, though, consider these definitions, which will help you interpret the Scriptures below:

Righteousness means "the state of being in the right, or being vindicated."¹ In the OT it is sometimes seen as conforming to what is "right." Other times it used as meaning "relational, fitting the situation."²

Justice: In America, we usually only think of it in terms of "retribution:" do good and you get rewarded, do bad and you get punished. The "dictionary" definition, though, is "the standard by which the benefits and penalties of living in society are distributed."³ "It is also "a deliverance, rectifying the gross social inequities of the disadvantaged. It puts an end to the conditions that produce the injustice. . . ."⁴ "Justice is closely related to love and grace . . . rather than being a contrasting principle. It thus provides vindication, deliverance, and creation of community in addition to retribution."⁵ Most often in the Bible, the focus of justice "is upon the oppressed with particular attention given to specific groups such as the poor, widows, the fatherless, slaves, resident aliens, wage earners, and those with physical infirmities. . . . Justice is associated with the basic requirements of life in community. Basic needs are basic rights [see Jeremiah 5:27-28]. . . . These rights, found by observing what matters are involved in the context of passages mentioning justice. . . , include land (Ezek. 45:9), food and clothing (Deut. 10:18), and shelter (Job 8:6). While due process is not omitted. . . , the dominating concerns are substantive, material, and benefit oriented. . . . [Justice] will not be to the advantage of everyone in the community. The oppressed are raised; the oppressors are judged (1 Sam. 2:7-10; cf. Luke 1:51-53; 6:20-26)."⁶

It is also important to keep in mind that in Greek (the language in which the New Testament was written), the word that often gets translated as "righteous" or "piety" can equally mean "justice." One must realize that this word and the words Paul uses a great deal (justified and justification) share the same root word. You can obviously see the similarity between these words used by Paul and "justice." Therefore, where the word is translated "righteous" or "piety" below, I've also included "justice" to show that as an equally viable (probable?) definition.

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Exodus 23: ¹⁰For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; ¹¹but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard.

Leviticus 23: ²²When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 10: ¹⁷For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸who executes **justice** for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 15: ⁷If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 935.
² *Ibid.*
³ *Ibid.*, 557.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 558.
⁵ *Ibid.*
⁶ *Ibid.*

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towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt. ¹⁰Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

- Note that in Matthew 26:11, Jesus paraphrases the first part of vs. 11 above when he says, "For you will always have the poor with you. . . ." He says this in justification for the woman "wasting" the perfume on him instead of selling it to help the poor. In doing so, Jesus is NOT saying that we are not to help the poor (as only one example, see Matthew 25:31-40 below). Rather, he is saying that from time to time it is good to honor the servants in our midst (remember Jesus came to serve, not to be served).

Isaiah 10: ¹Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, ²to turn aside the needy from **justice** and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! ³What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?

Isaiah 58: ³"Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of **injustice**, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Jeremiah 5: ²⁷Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore they have become great and rich, ²⁸they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with **justice** the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the **rights** (or **justice**) of the needy.

Psalms 10: ¹⁷O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear ¹⁸to do **justice** for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

Psalms 146: ⁵Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, ⁶who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; ⁷who executes **justice** for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; ⁸the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the **righteous**. ⁹The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

Matthew 5:6 – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for **righteousness / justice**, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:10 – Blessed are those who are persecuted for **righteousness / justice** sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:20 – For I tell you, unless your **righteousness / justice** exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

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Matthew 6:1 – Beware of practicing your **piety / righteousness / justice** before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

- Note that immediately, Jesus says in vs. 2: “So whenever you give alms. . . .” “Alms” is a term about providing the unmet needs of the poor. What does that say about the connectedness of piety, righteousness, justice, and caring for the poor?

Matthew 23: ²³Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: **justice / righteousness** and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Matthew 25: ³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the **righteous / just** will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

Luke 4: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Acts 2: ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 4: ³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Romans 14:17 – For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but **righteousness / justice** and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

- This is the Apostle Paul's discussion about the Lord's Supper. Paul's main point is that in this meal that everybody is to get a fair amount.

James 3: ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of **righteousness / justice** is sown in peace for (or by) those who make peace.