

The Place to Begin Learning about Social Justice

by Tim Challies

In recent days the topic of social justice has received much attention within the church and without. As Christians we are committed to living according to God's Word, and so we have rightly been turning to the Bible to learn how it would guide us. We have been scouring its pages to see what it says about matters of justice. That is well and good, but I have become convinced that even as we've done this, we may have overlooked one important resource. In fact, we may have overlooked the one book that is explicitly and specifically intended to give us wisdom for this very topic. We may have skipped over the best place to begin when learning about social justice.

The book of Proverbs is about training the mind in order to live a God-honoring life, for right living follows right thinking. It exists so the reader can "know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight" which will equip him to excel "in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice, and equity" (v. 2-3). Righteousness, justice, and equity: these are words closely related to at least some of what we today identify as social justice—the protection of the vulnerable, the distribution of wealth, equality of opportunity, and so on. They refer to the ways individuals relate well and wisely within a community.

Righteousness is acting proactively according to ethical standards to foster a kind of harmony between all people. Bruce Waltke points out that "The righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves." The righteous don't merely do the occasional good deed, but live their lives in such a way that they deliberately pursue peace and the good of others.

Justice is perhaps similar to righteousness, but in the sense that it marks a response to a lack of harmony. Justice is good and necessary where there is *injustice*. Though it may involve legal actions, it doesn't need to, for any person can labor to bring about what is good and fair for others. To behave justly is to behave with fairness when there is a dispute or a measure of disharmony.

Equity refers literally to straightness or flatness, but ethically to behavior that is fitting, that adheres to moral and social norms, and that especially closely adheres to God's divine law. Where a moral or ethical standard has been set, equity is promoting it and adhering to it.

As Christians consider how to act righteously toward others, as we consider the right response to injustice, as we ponder matters of inequity, we have a book of the Bible that is meant to guide us. Or, if we step back farther, to even consider what defines righteousness and unrighteousness, what counts as justice and injustice, or what it means to treat people with equity or inequity, the book of Proverbs promises it will help us “know wisdom and instruction, to understand words of insight” so we can then act in ways that bless others and honor God. It is a beginner’s guide to gaining wisdom and, therefore, a beginner’s guide to living out wisdom.

Sure enough, even a quick look through the book will show that righteousness, justice, and equity are prominent themes. It will orient us to God’s concerns and emphases. Here is a brief collection of just some of the applicable proverbs.

- 14:31: “Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him.”
- 16:8: “Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues with injustice.”
- 16:11: “A just balance and scales are the Lord’s; all the weights in the bag are his work.”
- 17:15: “He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord.”
- 17:23: “The wicked accepts a bribe in secret to pervert the ways of justice.”
- 18:5: “It is not good to be partial to the wicked or to deprive the righteous of justice.”
- 18:17: “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.”
- 19:17: “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed.”
- 20:23: “Unequal weights are an abomination to the LORD, and false scales are not good.”
- 21:3: “To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.”
- 21:15: “When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers.”
- 22:16: “Whoever oppresses the poor to increase his own wealth, or gives to the rich, will only come to poverty.”
- 22:22-23: “Do not rob the poor, because he is poor, or crush the afflicted at the gate, for the Lord will plead their cause and rob of life those who rob them.”
- 23:10-11: “Do not move an ancient landmark or enter the fields of the fatherless, for their Redeemer is strong; he will plead their cause against you.”

- 24:24-25: “Whoever says to the wicked, ‘You are in the right,’ will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations, but those who rebuke the wicked will have delight, and a good blessing will come upon them.”
- 28:5: “Evil men do not understand justice, but those who seek the Lord understand it completely.”
- 28:27: “Whoever gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse.”
- 29:4: “By justice a king builds up the land, but he who exacts gifts tears it down.”
- 29:7: “A righteous man knows the rights of the poor; a wicked man does not understand such knowledge.”
- 29:14: “If a king faithfully judges the poor, his throne will be established forever.”
- 29:26: “Many seek the face of a ruler, but it is from the Lord that a man gets justice.”
- 31:8-9: “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

As Christians emphasize matters of righteousness, justice, and equity, as we ponder the challenges related to living peaceably and fairly in covenant community and the wider community, as we distinguish genuinely Christian behavior from worldly counterfeits, there is no doubt that we need a source of reliable wisdom. We need to know not only *that* we must act justly and love mercy and walk humbly, but also *how*. Thankfully, God has given us a whole book to instruct us, if only we will carefully and prayerfully read, ponder, and apply it.