

Christian Justice – Thomas Tut Puot

Justice means “treatment of people that is morally fair and right” and “the legal process of judging and punishing people”.¹ The word “justice” occurs 115 times in the New International Version (N.I.V.) Old Testament, usually translating the Hebrew word “mispat”. One example is, “For the word of the Lord is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love”, Psalm 33:4-5. God’s people were warned to live by justice: “Appoint judges and officials for each of your tribes in every town the Lord your God is giving you, and they shall judge the people fairly. Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you”, Deuteronomy 16:18-20.²

In the older King James Version (Authorised Version, A.V.) of the Bible, “justice” is presented from “mispat” only once, in Job 36:17. Elsewhere that version translates “sedeq” as “justice”, mainly with the meaning of rightness or righteousness, but sometimes emphasising faithfulness and truthfulness.³ The meaning is brought out well in the first occurrence of “sedeq” in the Bible. Two explanatory clauses follow the initial statement: “Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great, but judge your neighbour fairly”, Leviticus 19:15.

Where the two words “mispat” and “sedaq” appear together the A.V. translates the whole phrase as “judgement”. In Genesis 18:19 God speaks about Abraham. He says, “For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgement, that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he has spoken of him”. The N.I.V. translates the key phrase as, “to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just”. Similarly, comparing the two translations of Deuteronomy 16:20 we discover all God’s people are to, “Follow justice and justice alone”,

¹ Macmillan School Dictionary (Oxford: Macmillan) 2004.

² See The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press) 1980, Volume 2, page 839.

³ W.E.Vine Complete Expository Dictionary of Old Testament and New Testament words (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson) 1996, pages 205-206.

(N.I.V.), “That which is altogether just shalt thou follow”, (A.V.). Things that are “just” are things that are “fair and morally right”⁴ and “fair or impartial in action or judgement”.⁵

Good judgement is the practice of what is right and just. Justice (or judgement) specifies what is right, not only as measured by a code of law, but also by what makes for right relationships so people can live together in harmony and peace. Judgement *with justice* is the rule that should always guide the Christian judge.⁶

The English term “justice” has a strong legal flavour. But the concept of justice in the Bible goes beyond the law courts into everyday life. The Bible speaks of “doing justice”, see Psalm 82:1-4 and Proverbs 21:3, whereas we speak of “getting justice.” Doing justice is to maintain what is right, or, to set things right that are at present wrong. Justice is done when honourable relations are maintained between husbands and wives, between parents and children, between employers and employees, between government and citizens, and between human beings and God. Justice refers to neighbourliness in spirit and action. Our Lord Jesus said that doing this justice – expressing our love to our neighbours – was a big part of the two most important commandments God has ever given, Mark 12:30-31.

Kings, rulers, and all those in governmental power are to be instruments of justice. Solomon prayed this for himself, Psalm 72:1-2, a good prayer for anyone in authority to pray: “Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. May he judge⁷ your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice”. This is exemplified by testimonies to David in 2 Samuel 8:15, and Josiah in Jeremiah 22:15–16. The prophet Micah declared to at least three kings⁸, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act⁹ justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God”, Micah 6:8. Isaiah describes God’s suffering servant, a description best fulfilled in Jesus Himself, as

⁴ Macmillan *School Dictionary* (Oxford: Macmillan) 2004.

⁵ Collins *English Dictionary* (Glasgow: HarperCollins) 1995.

⁶ And all other *good* judges too!

⁷ “He will judge” is the N.I.V. text. I have quoted from it’s alternative footnote, “May he judge”.

⁸ Micah 1:1.

⁹ Notice that “to act” is “to *do* something”.

one whose task as ruler will be to bring justice to the nations, a task He *will* accomplish without oppressing the needy, Isaiah 42:1–4.¹⁰

In the Old Testament the prophets were champions of social justice. Today Christian pastors should be among God's instruments of justice in our country, justice which has been destroyed by wars over many years. The Lord told to the tribal leaders of Israel, those who had been selected to be the judges alongside Moses, "Do not show partiality in judging; hear both small and great alike. Do not be afraid of any man, for judgement belongs to God", Deuteronomy 1:17. During those days, justice was often perverted through bribery and favouritism or partiality, Proverbs 17:23. In order to work for justice we have to know that God's rewards come to those who practice justice in all their dealings with others. In the words of the prophet, "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream", Amos 5:24. The mighty river Nile flows through Sudan, the Blue and the White joining together at Khartoum. Whatever else is going on in the country the river gives life to our land. So as Christians we must continually work for justice to permeate all of our society.

The Bible teaches that God is fair and impartial in His treatment of all people. "The Lord is a God of justice", Isaiah 30:18. As such He is interested in fairness and in all things that promote right relationships between all people. God's own actions and His decisions are always true and always right, Job 34:12; Revelation 16:7. God's demands on individuals and on nations to look after¹¹ victims of oppression are just demands, Psalm 82. Ultimately God is the judge of all the earth, verse 8. We are all accountable to Him.

As Lord and Judge God brings justice to nations, Psalm 67:4, and, if I may summarise, He "sets things right" on behalf of the oppressed, the hungry poor, the prisoners who are victims of injustice, the blind, those burdened with cares, those in places strange to them, the orphans and the bereaved, Psalms 103:6; 146:6–9. For the wicked, the unjust, and the oppressor, God as supreme Judge of the earth is a dreaded force. "The Lord reigns forever",

¹⁰ See especially verses 1 and 4.

¹¹ "Defend and rescue" are the N.I.V. words. Other translations say, "Deliver, be fair, do justice".

Psalm 146:10. But for all who are unjustly treated, God's just action is the ultimate reason for hope. ¹² For those of us who work for Christian justice, God is our hope too.

We rightly talk about the duties of a Christian in relation to himself but we also have to examine his or her obligations in relation to others. The first important element for a proper relationship with all other people is justice. However we see everyday life, we all know that there are marked differences in the conditions of just relationships between people.

Christian justice is the most complete type of justice because it is the justice of the Christian heart. Its most basic, wise, clear and comprehensible principle is expressed in the Gospel by these words of Jesus: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you", Matthew 7:12. This positive statement of "the royal law"¹³ shows it is not enough to do nothing! All people, especially those who are with us in this beloved country, despite their religions and their ethnic backgrounds are our neighbours. Do not do to them what we do not wish for ourselves! "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord", Leviticus 19:18.

Moreover, not only must we do no evil, we must positively do good. Our actions must follow our Christian conscience, flowing from our Christ-centred hearts, being motivated by the gospel law of love, mercy and forgiveness.¹⁴ As the church of God in Sudan we have to share the love of Christ to all the people of Sudan, including those we may have considered as enemies. If we want people to treat us sincerely, then we must open our hearts to our neighbours. Do not be an egoist. Do not consider your rights more important than anything or anyone else. Some loyal and correct people do this in a cold-hearted clinical way. Rather place the welfare and good of your neighbour *above all of your own rights*. This is the challenging law of Christian love.

In this country today the egos of some people are the real cause of all miserable situations we are facing. The Christian church should be the place for anyone in Sudan to have a

¹² See among other Scriptures, Genesis 18:25, Deuteronomy 32:36; 1 Samuel 2:7-10; Psalm 7:10-11; Psalm 50:1-6; Hebrews 12:22-24; James 4:12; 1 Peter 4:5.

¹³ James 2:8-13.

¹⁴ Romans 13:8-10.

challenging encounter with the Prince of Peace, the source of justice: Jesus Christ. In a prophecy about Him, Isaiah says: "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this", Isaiah 9:7. Christians all over the world, including here in Sudan, live under the rule of Jesus now in His trans-national kingdom. At the climax of history His unavoidable government will be far-flung, peaceful, and endless. Sitting upon the throne of David, He will rule with judgement and justice. How will all this be brought about? The Lord's jealous care for His people will perform this. Since God is working for justice, so should we.

Christian justice speaks to us about ourselves too. We contribute to our own misery! The Lord Jesus said, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Let me take the speck out of your eye", when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly how to remove the speck from your brother's eye", Matthew 7:3-5. We can learn from the ascetics of Christianity, while grieving so terribly about their own sins, and being almost heartlessly strict and demanding of themselves, they were unbelievably all-forgiving and compassionate towards other people, *covering the faults of their neighbours*, with kindness and love.

Generally speaking, the Christian rule of life teaches us that in such sorrowful events as arguments and misunderstandings, we must not seek to find guilt in others but in ourselves. Our own lusts, obduracy, self-love and egoism contribute to strife. Christian justice demands from us consideration towards others. Even this, however, is not sufficient. Christian justice calls us to see, in every person, our own human brother, perhaps a brother in Christ, certainly a beloved creation in the image of almighty God. And no matter how a man might fall, no matter how seriously he darkens the image of God in himself by sins and vices, crimes and violence, we must still seek the spark of God in his soul. We must love him because he is still

our neighbour. St. John of Kronstadt once said: "Sins are sins, but the basis in man is God's image...Hate sin, but love the sinner".¹⁵

Together with respect for the person who is our neighbour, we must also exhibit trust in him. This is especially necessary when a person who has fallen into error uses the evangelical words, "I repent" and promises correction. How often the good intentions of such a repenting person are met with mistrust and coldness from Christians who should accept him! Sadly then, the good desires towards correction disappear and are replaced by destructive anger and a decision to revert. Who answers for the destruction of this soul?

In contrast a sincerely loving Christian, joyfully receives the good volition of the repentant and contrite neighbour. The Christian emphasises by deeds and words his or her full trust and respect for the person. The Christian will often support and strengthen the one who is still weak and faltering, helping them to follow Jesus along the right path. Of course it sometimes happens that a person who has promised to correct himself will misuse the trust of the neighbour, either through weakness of will or with a conscious desire to deceive. As traumatic as this is, it must not be allowed to completely crush our feelings of trust and good-will. Christian love "always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres",

I Corinthians 13:7. We should seek to pay the price ourselves, and not to pass it on to others.¹⁶ I am so glad Jesus gives me more than one chance!

The Bible declares that the world is fallen and sinful. Our world is full of injustice. But the Christian church is the voice for justice in an unjust world. Therefore we Christians have to learn how to rescue the oppressed, the child held in forced prostitution during war, the prisoner illegally detained and tortured, the widow robbed of her land and livelihood, the children sold into slavery, and the many people who have little or no freedom to worship their God in their own chosen way. We have to be witnesses to the world of Christ's unending love, His transforming power and His impartial justice. We know that the Bible declares this world's need for salvation and for justice. Christ has called us to be His witnesses to uttermost parts of this very dark and unjust world. We have to prepare our minds for action in the world,

¹⁵ www.stjohndc.org/Russian/parables

¹⁶ Romans 14:12-13.

beyond the walls of our church buildings.¹⁷ We must serve our Lord by serving all of our neighbours to create hope and justice. We are sent to be the salt in the world's corruption and to be the light in the world's dark injustice.¹⁸

"The church must always remember that God's truth, peace and justice as revealed by the cross of Christ are intended not only for the church and believers, but also for the entire world. We are called not merely to believe in peace and justice but to work to achieve them for anyone without any distinction or discrimination".¹⁹

The oppressor knows that the prime reason Christians do nothing is because we have lost the hope of making any difference in our world. Our absence from the task only makes the oppressor look stronger, compounding our own despair and weakness. But the Christian gospel changes people.²⁰ We believe it and we have seen it happen. And our Lord Jesus has promised to be with us as we fulfill the commission He has given us.²¹ We do not need to be afraid.

Through the love of Christ we can establish Sudan as a country of peace, prosperity and justice. The Lord's jealous care for His people is the same today as it has always been. Let justice be done! As we work for justice, we know our God will be on our side.

Discussion guide

Using this chapter and Scriptures quoted:

1. Share something you think is unjust (not fair to everyone) about life in Sudan today.
2. Why did God say, "Follow justice and justice alone" just as the people of Israel were about to settle in their own land as a nation? Deuteronomy 16:20.

What are the results of injustice? Leviticus 19:15.
3. What are the main differences between "doing justice" and "getting justice"?

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Peter 1:13-16.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Peter 2:11-17.

¹⁹ Yusufu Turaki Truth, Justice and Reconciliation article in the Africa Bible Commentary (Nairobi: Word Alive) 2006, p.875.

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17; Luke 4:18-19.

²¹ Matthew 28:18-20; Matthew 10:17-20.

4. What do the examples of the “bruised reed” and the “smoldering wick” in Isaiah 42:1-4 tell you about *the way in which* Christians should follow our Lord Jesus in working for justice?

Discover the key resource Christians have for justice from those verses.

5. Why should Christian leaders be instruments of social justice?

6. For what kind of causes should Christians be the champions of justice?

Compare your ideas with Psalm 146:1-10 and Luke 4:18-19.

7. What is the positive aim (or focus) of “the royal law”?

Consider how you can “do justice” for a particular person or group – *not* for yourself.

8. Discuss the place of self-examination in working for justice.

9. Why is it so difficult to trust a repentant person?

Share ideas for accepting such a person back into society.