

## Social Justice

In today's society, Social Justice is one of the most talked about issues, yet do we really understand what Social Justice even means and is there really a single definition that we can all agree on. What is the Bible's definition of Social Justice and how is that in contrast to the secular world view that we are being fed by government, the media, universities and social media from around the world? What are the core concepts that usually make up a social justice issue? In this article we are going to explore just a few of these questions in an effort to expand our thinking and maybe even our beliefs in what social justice should look like to a Christian.

We can find many definitions for Social Justice but here are a few from the web:

- “Social Justice - Fair treatment of all people in a society, including respect for the rights of minorities and equitable distribution of resources among members of a community.”
- “Social justice is the view that everyone deserves equal economic, political and social rights and opportunities.”

One website listed the 9 biggest Social Justice issues of 2020 as:

1. Voting rights. Exercising the right to vote is one of the social justice issues prioritized by the National Association of Social Workers. ...
2. Climate justice. ...
3. Healthcare. ...
4. Refugee crisis. ...
5. Racial injustice. ...
6. Income gap. ...
7. Gun violence. ...
8. Hunger and food insecurity.

With these issues and definitions, it would appear that Social Justice can mean a lot of different things to people. One thing that does seem to be a common theme, however, is the notion of fairness, equity, equality and justice.

We offer these working definitions for the following terms:

Equality – The life of every individual holds the same value, regardless of race, sex, or ability.

Equity – A cultural system that reflects the equal value of each individual.

Justice – The result of a functioning system of equity.

With this understanding, we affirm:

1. Each human being is made in the image of God, conveying the same value to each individual Genesis 1:27 says; “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” The value of an elderly person lying sick in their final days of life, an unborn baby, a poor child of color in an undeveloped country, a child with mental disability, or someone with serious mental health issues all have the same value by God's standard. The imprint of God's image makes us equal, not the measure of our wealth, value, or success in society.

2. We also affirm the fair and equal treatment of all by the laws and governmental regulations that we all live under as citizens. In an equitable system, citizens of that society experience the rewards and consequences of that system in the same way. In other words, the consequences for a first-time speeding ticket for traveling over the speed limit by 15mph should be the same for everyone, regardless of skin color or gender. In the same way, benefits should be awarded equally as well. A medical license should require the same qualifications regardless of the race or gender of the person applying. In other words, laws and governmental rules should not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, race, etc. for all its citizens.

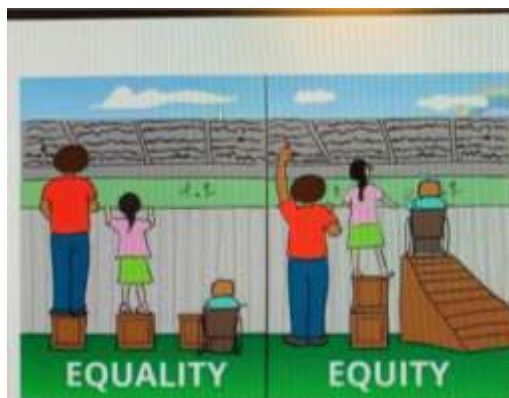
3. An equitable system requires equal access for everyone to pursue the rewards of hard work. However, equity does not require that everyone have the same standard of living. In this world, gifts and abilities, along with one's work ethic, usually result in reward. We recognize that there are exceptions to this rule, but usually, when a person works hard, using their particular gifts, they are rewarded. The harder one works, the more they are paid. The greater the skill, the higher the reward.

We see this pattern described in the Bible, beginning already in Genesis 1:26 when God commanded us to develop the world He created. When we use the abilities to develop His world, we are allowed to experience the blessings that accompany obedience. Paul teaches this, in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, when he writes, "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat."

A just society provides an atmosphere of freedom where people can grow and develop based on their gifts and abilities. A society that punishes those who work hard by enforcing an unrealistic tax load, for example, stifles this atmosphere of freedom and discourages people from further development of God's world.

However, we also recognize that because of sin, this world does not work the way that God intended. Freedom can be misused for greed, and the reward for hard work is not always consistent. Therefore, we recognize the need for government oversight that restrains evil, preventing the hoarding of wealth and promoting adequate reward for hard work.

At the same time, we recognize that equity, equality, and justice do not require the same standard of living for everyone. We reject the idea that everyone should be placed on the same economic level regardless of education, experience, and ability. Many of us may have seen pictures similar to that below, illustrating some of the terms we use when discussing social justice which are equality, equity, and justice. Consider this depiction of equality and equity:



In this setting, everyone is an equal distance from the ground, they begin from the same spot. However, because of biological differences, God-given or sin-impaired, they do not experience the same access to their goal, being able to watch the game over the fence. Equality means they start from the same place, but the result is inequity because of their biological differences.

We recognize the value of diversity in God's creation. Each person has the same value and should have the same freedom to contribute to its well-being and to society in a unique way. If society strives to artificially make us all the same using a flawed criteria for equality in the name of Social Justice, what opportunities do we have to complement each other and demonstrate our love for one another?

However, Biblical equity does not require that everyone share the same economic status. While each gift and ability is equally valued in the eyes of God, this world assigns different values to different gifts and abilities. If we consider the creation story from Genesis 4, Cain was a farmer who worked the land and his brother Abel was a herdsman who kept flocks. As we continue in the story, some of Cain's descendants were experts at playing stringed instruments and pipes and others were masters at forging all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron etc. Those who have natural God-given advantages are required to be responsible with those gifts and use them to bless those who are not as fortunate.

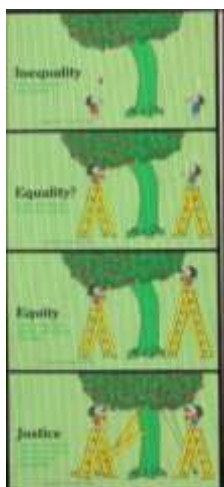
In society, we value those with unique skills and reward them with economic wealth. We think of skilled surgeons, top athletes, architects, artists to just name a few. Although most of these people have many natural gifts, their success did not just fall in their laps but was accentuated with much determination and hard work to achieve these high levels of performance and the corresponding economic compensation that often results. This drive and motivation to do better and to be the best using the talents that God has given us is taught in scripture and is one of the key attributes of a truly free society. Typically we will find that the economic reward is not the main motivator in these situations but the drive to be the best that God has made us to be. In Luke 12:48, Jesus says that "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." When someone is penalized economically or socially for using their gifts and abilities to the best of their ability, forced to pay higher taxes or judged and criticized as being greedy or not caring, we are discouraging people from doing their best. Rather, a just society gives people the opportunity to voluntarily share their wealth with society and experience the joy that is described in Isaiah 58:7-10:

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard. Then you will call, and the Lord will answer; you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I. “If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.

4. While we recognize and affirm a culture of freedom where people are not hindered in using their gifts and abilities in service to God, we also recognize that freedom can be misused. While we proclaim that God is redeeming and restoring this world through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we also recognize the need for restrictions and restraints that prevent injustice and evil from doing harm.

It would be wonderful for people to voluntarily share the blessings they have received for the assistance of others. However, human greed often stands in the way of this natural generosity. Sometimes, steps must be taken to restrain evil and create equity.

In the following cartoons we see two individuals that share the same physical features, they share the same goal, but the situation is different. The people are the same, but the environment favors one over the other. Equality, using our definitions, recognizes the value of both individuals and the right that each has to access the fruit. Equity, according to this picture, attempts to correct the situation by giving equal access to both persons. In the bottom picture, access is given, not by providing advantages to one or the other, but by changing the situation, giving equal access to all.



We all agree that everyone should have access to the basic necessities of life. We agree with the Declaration of Independence, that everyone has the equal right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

5. However, we recognize a disagreement between how God and the world view happiness. When scripture is ignored, happiness is often equated with wealth. Many suggest that everyone should have access to an upper-middle class standard of living, the achievement of the American Dream. With this assumption, any obstacle that stands in the way of owning two cars, a four-bedroom house, and a big-screen TV is considered unjust. Therefore, anyone who is not able to achieve this lifestyle deserves to receive assistance, an additional advantage that gets them closer to “happiness” as defined by our secular culture.

When we look to scripture for an understanding of justice and equality, we find something different. First, we are taught that happiness is not financial. James 1:9-11, in talking about finding joy while facing trials, states:

**Believers in humble circumstances ought to take pride in their high position. <sup>10</sup>But the rich should take pride in their humiliation—since they will pass away like a wild flower. <sup>11</sup>For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich will fade away even while they go about their business.**

Believers in humble circumstances can be thankful for how difficulties make our faith grow stronger, while believers who are wealthy can be thankful for a similar reason, because their wealth and position are temporary, evaporating with the sun, leaving only their faith as their lasting treasure. Therefore, true, Biblical happiness can be pursued regardless of circumstances.

However, the Bible is also clear that while not everyone should expect to enjoy wealth and comfort, access to basic needs must be given to everyone. Everyone has the right to eat healthy food, to receive health care, and to earn a comparable wage to others with the same ability and experience. Deuteronomy 15:4-5 makes this startling statement:

**There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you, <sup>5</sup>if only you fully obey the Lord your God and are careful to follow all these commands I am giving you today**

In the kingdom of God, there is enough for everyone. While not everyone will have an equal standard of living, everyone should have access to resources that allow them to live a secure and safe life.

To establish justice in this manner requires two conditions, that resources are not hoarded by a few, and that false obstacles be removed. First, the expectation that there be no poor assumes that everyone is following God’s commands which, needless to say, is not the condition of this world. Many consume more resources than are necessary for a secure and safe life, leaving less for others to access. Many squander the wealth they have been given through sinful choices and waste and then demand they need more help from government and those around them blaming their economic position on inequity in social injustice. To correct this imbalance, the government that God has placed in this world has implemented programs and systems that try to provide resources to those with greatest need in an effort to redistribute resources in an equitable way. Hence the need for taxes to implement these programs. The government’s attempts have met with varying successes and failures, due to sin, corruption, waste and fraud.

However, going back to the definition of happiness, the redistribution of resources is not always just, as the government sometimes attempts to provide the same standard of living to all in a flawed understanding of equity.

The second requirement for justice is to remove artificial barriers, such as discrimination, that keep people from an equal pursuit of resources. When a Black woman is required to pay more for a car than a Black man, when a Black person is required to pay more than a White person, then discrimination is standing in the way of the justice described in Deuteronomy.

A Biblical view of justice requires God's people to speak the truth and correct the understanding of the standard of living that we can expect as citizens of this country. God's people are called to honor the lifestyle of those who live humbly, while reminding the rich and powerful that their wealth will disappear with the morning.

We are also called to be active in removing barriers to basic needs, to resist the hoarding of resources and to fight against discrimination that stands in the way of equity. Jeremiah 22:1–3 says:

**Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah sitting on the throne of David — you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates. Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood.**

A true sense of justice can only be found by returning to the source, to the God who is just, who created human beings in His image and who has tasked His people to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly<sup>j</sup> with your God (Micah 6:8).

### Summary

So what does this all mean for us as Christians as we are barraged with different definitions and agendas under the cover of social justice? We are called to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. As followers of Jesus, we need to carefully analyze what the secular world is attempting to convince us of and not accept everything we are fed at face value. We need to be cautious as believers to test everything against God's word as the devil is crafty and will use every lie to lead us astray.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to look after orphans and widows, as this is pure and faultless religion (James 1:27). We join Jesus in proclaiming good news to the poor and setting the oppressed free (Luke 4:18).

In light of this, we should monitor all social, economic and governmental policies (taxes, housing, employment, etc.) that treat anyone unfairly and discriminates to the advantage of one group of people over another. We condemn practices that penalize those who work hard, using their gifts and abilities for the good of society, while at the same time we condemn practices that inhibit people from benefiting from the use of their gifts and abilities.

In conclusion, we are committed to being used by God to recreate a world of shalom, where people are valued because they bear God's image, and everyone is given an opportunity to participate in society using the abilities that God has given to them.