



# Justice Required

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### Jeremiah 33:10-16

What do you think of when you hear the word “justice”? We tend to picture a court scene, the sentencing of a guilty party, the condemnation of one who has offended another and broken various laws. That is part of the issue, but in general, that is not what the Bible intends to portray when it discusses the need for justice. Rather, the Biblical injunctions for justice have more to do with our transformation, such that we accomplish what is just, what is right. As we hear God’s demands for our just actions, what are those right or just things we prefer to avoid?

The Jews often dealt with a measure of confusion over how to appropriately interpret prophetic voices that discussed a future fulfillment. We aren’t so different, although hindsight is often a very helpful teacher. To be sure, prophets speaking of future events did not always make clear distinctions from one event to another, nor were they always sure of the details of which they spoke. At times, it may be that those who recorded their words mixed or joined messages due to their own confusion. How it came about, we don’t know, but the passage we read in Jeremiah today speaks of two separate issues of God’s promise. The Jews often tried to read them as one, at least until the first portion had been fulfilled and they awaited the second.

Reading closely, Jeremiah begins first to discuss the destruction around Jerusalem and Judah in the days of the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem had been laid waste by invading armies, and its people carted off to Babylon. The poor and powerless remained behind, while the leaders and wealthy were taken away. Others were brought in to wield control and power over the remaining inhabitants.

Jeremiah looked to the day when Yahweh would restore Jerusalem and its outlying territories. Jeremiah himself was taken into exile in Egypt. He looked to a time of return. He looked for a time when God would set things back aright. He spoke of hope amid the destruction and desolation he saw and heard in reports of his homeland. When the people were sent back to Jerusalem under a later regime in Babylon, the people rejoiced in God’s justice. God had righted the wrongs and placed Israel back in the land of Yahweh, and things were right in the world. Well, there was still the issue of foreign domination.

The prophet had said that all would be as before, yet when you get down to it, nothing can ever truly be as once before. Circumstances change, and a return is always different. In days before, Israel had not served Yahweh as they should have. The point of the exile was that things should be different upon their return. At the end of exile, however, much in Israel was better than before. There was just that question of political power and subjugation. Don’t we tend to agree that is injustice?

Many understood that such was the issue that really still needed changing. The land had been restored. Crops grew once again. Animals were kept and people roamed the streets in meaningful pursuits. The hand of foreign powers still ruled the day and hung over their heads, yet the people were once again worshipping Yahweh as in the days of David’s reign. What was missing in the equation was freedom from their oppressors, or so they believed. After all, they understood justice to mean their independence from bowing to some other authority. Justice should mean power for God’s people!

Jesus did not seem so concerned with issues of political power and sovereignty for Israel. He was concerned for wholly other aspects of justice and righteousness. Perhaps it was not so clear for Jeremiah

or Jeremiah's scribe. After all, the Jews of Jesus' day read these words and considered them an expression of certainty that political independence for Israel was just around the corner. The king of David's line would rise to reign from Jerusalem and establish security, peace, redemption, honor, and all that is right. They would call him "God is our Justice"! What could be wrong with that?

We look back to Jeremiah's words and consider Jesus as that Davidic king he predicted. We find answers to our yearning in Jesus, and yet too often we fail to really consider how and why Jesus' reign did not throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. How can Jesus be God's Justice, when he never got around to executing our understanding of justice?

Jesus would respond to Jeremiah's words differently. He would talk about the doing of justice, the doing of what is right. That is, after all, what the word means: doing right. Micah phrases it as doing justice in contrast to injustice. It is interesting how justice and injustice are not antonyms in English. From the standpoint of Biblical definitions for the terms, they should be.

Injustice is about mistreating people. Justice should be about treating them appropriately, fairly, correctly. That, after all, is what the character of Jesus' ministry seemed to be about. He treated others with love, care, respect, and concern. He looked upon others as people loved by the Heavenly Father. He dealt with them in terms of their needs, in terms of God's grace, in terms of mercy, in terms of love. He did those things that were right to do, even in spite of regulation or traditions established against doing justice. Politics just simply did not figure into the equation of his teaching and ministry.

The Jews wanted political freedom and national redemption from external oppression. Jesus did not respond to those issues directly. Instead, he taught his followers to treat others in justice and love, without any contingency plan to measure another's worth or dignity. What kind of limits do we chose to place around applying God's justice to our lives?

When he fed the five thousand, he did not first chastise them for leaving home unprepared. He simply addressed them at the point of their need. When Peter asked about the extent of forgiveness, he responded that forgiveness should be granted without measure. When they asked whom to include as a neighbor to be loved, Jesus extended the definition to include their hated enemies. When they asked him to condemn sinners, he responded by granting pardon and a chance for transformation. Such was the character of the justice of Jesus' reign.

Jesus' reign of justice was not bound by politics, force, coercion, or obligation. He invited individuals into God's reign with no consideration of national or international political arrangements. When the interplay of politics and religion came up before him, he answered that one should bow to the external authority of political masters, but give allegiance to God in all matters of God's will.

God's reign was not, is not, and will not be limited to the arena of politics. It flows rather in the arena of life and human relationships. That is where justice begins. It begins as we bend our will to allow God's justice to flow through our actions and interactions. It takes root in our lives as we respond to one another based on God's love and compassion. It comes to life as we begin allowing God's justice to flow through us in all our relationships.

God's justice in Christ Jesus never had anything to do with our own righteousness. Rather, it was a call to allow God's righteousness to flow in and through us. As Jesus comes to live within us, it is God's justice, God's definition of doing right, which comes to find fulfillment. Are we willing to begin living up to the requirements of God's justice? Anything less will never measure up.

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