Justice And Mercy

Justice and mercy work hand in hand to accomplish the purposes of God. God, in His justice, allows suffering to cause a man to see and release sin. When the sin is released, God's justice destroys the sin and His mercy immediately enters in to restore and renew the sinner.

With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (NIV Micah 6:6-8)

Human Conceptions of Justice

God commands us to do justice, yet since the time of Plato the western mind has struggled to define justice, let alone achieve it.

Part of the reason is that we have been chasing the wrong dog. Human justice is not divine justice. The two differ in almost every important aspect. Until we grasp the differences between the two, and align ourselves with the divine, we cannot please God, we cannot walk with him, we cannot preach the true gospel, we cannot fulfill the purposes of our lives and the church in the world.

Civics 101

Justice is the grist of politics. It is what we demand for ourselves from others. It is usually only had—if ever—when one person or group is able to achieve what they think they deserve (a.k.a., "rights"). What I think I deserve is almost always relative to what others have. (Ancient Etruscans did not lobby for prescription drug benefits for obvious reasons.) The way I get what I think I deserve is through power—the ability to achieve desired outcomes. Authority is the legal use of power in order to achieve desired outcomes. Legislators are the people with the power to write the laws, and those self-perpetuating laws give them the self-perpetuating power to either enforce the laws or to change them. Politics (government) is the mechanism by which laws are created and enforced. Thus, modern politics has been characterized as "who gets what, when and how." Ancients said the same thing, only in a different way, when they argued that the end of politics is justice. In either case, human justice is largely the outcome of the exercise of power.

We should not be surprised that war—the ultimate exercise of power—is the bloody bridegroom of human history.

If I get what I think I deserve—as a nation or gender or people group or family or person—then I have received justice. If, on the other hand, I don't get what I deserve, I have suffered injustice. Stalin and Hitler, Mao and Pol Pot fired genocides kindled by such language. The twentieth century has crammed its gulags and concentration camps and re-education centers with people who could not defend themselves against the barbed-wire rhetoric of injustice thrown at them by the people who had the tanks and planes and machetes to accuse, judge and condemn them without recourse. But let's not fool ourselves. Democratic governments are no less violent in their language, and hardly less violent in their engagement with those who disagree with them.

What do I deserve? This is the question that the twentieth century has been sorting out in blood and steel. "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," is one answer; "each according to his ability, each according to his need" another. Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the "end of history" several years ago, arguing that the question had been solved. After all, fascism and communism have been largely defeated by the war rooms in the Pentagon and the board rooms of Coca-Cola. Was he right? Is democracy the best form of government?

Aristotle, as always, said it first and best—all forms of government are variations of the rule (power) of the one, the few or the many. They are "good" or "bad" forms of government depending upon in whose interest they exercise power. If the government desires that everybody is getting what they think they deserve, then government is good. This is a simple enough formula. In the secular mind, justice is achievable by an act of human will. We need only construct "good" governments and then justice will be achieved on the earth.

Why is this so very difficult to accomplish? Simply put, our hearts are wicked. It is impossible for everybody to get what they think they deserve for at least three reasons: 1) each of us is largely incapable of accurately perceiving what our true interests are or what we truly "deserve;" 2) therefore each of us is largely incapable of accurately assessing the validity claims of others seeking what they think they deserve and subsequently: 3) those who rule over us are equally incapable of knowing what we ourselves don't know about ourselves or others—presuming that those who rule over us even have the desire to do so.

Thus, the modern American prejudice—that democratic forms of government are the best—misses the mark. The problem of justice is not external (i.e., forms of government) but internal

(i.e., the structures of our hearts). Ironically, this is the same view of the Founding Fathers, from whom we have descended in every sense of the term. The wars of the twentieth century have been characterized as the triumph of democracy over tyranny. In the West, we have come to believe that dictatorships are inherently evil, and that the destruction of such societies is always a triumph of justice. History affirms Lord Acton's dictum that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. However, we have ignored the Founders fear that all of us are tyrants in the making. Our form of government was initially designed to keep all of our ambitions in check, but the mass democratization of our society has given rise in reality to what Lenin could only aspire —a true dictatorship of the proletariat.

If this isn't problematic enough, consider the problem posed by the Nobel laureate economist, Kenneth Arrow. Through game theory, he demonstrated that democratic forms of government are wholly unpredictable—a kind of insanity. His game—Arrow's Paradox—goes something like this. Imagine three persons, each of which has three desires they want to achieve (A,B,C). Imagine that they hold each in different priority (ABC, BCA, CAB). Imagine that each seeks to maximize each priority in order (A>B>C, B>C>A, C>A>B). Imagine that they live in a finite world where only one of these desires can be achieved, and imagine that the decision rule is majority vote. Bottom line? There is no way to predict the rational outcome of the vote. Each is as probable as the other. The result—tax rates or tax cuts, war or peace—is random. (In the real world, U.S. legislators achieve most of their desired outcomes in a finite world through deficit spending—a perfectly rational political decision resulting in economic insanity.)

How do we measure justice? How do we know if we have received what we think we deserve? The iron yardstick we use with blunt force trauma is equality. We want to know if our gender, race, age cohort, etc., has the same level of education, housing, income as others. If not, justice is denied. (On the other hand, if we have more than others, it is just because we earned it and/or are being compensated for other past injustices.) Increasingly, each of us in the West equates what we think we deserve with what we want. What is liberty? The freedom to do what I want, and freedom from the consequences of my actions. What do I need? In the United States, more "poor" people own microwaves than do "rich" Western Europeans, and the same is nearly true for color TVs, dishwashers and clothes dryers. For an increasing number of people here and around the industrialized world, poverty is coming to be defined as the inability to consume at the level of one's preference.

What are the causes of injustice? They are always external, and take one of two forms. Social injustice is imposed upon me by those structures within society that discriminate against me

(racism, sexism, etc., and the instrumentalities that enforce them). Cosmic injustice—my gender, my I.Q., the fact that I was born in Old Mexico rather than New Mexico—are the accidents of biology, history or deity that must be compensated for in order for me to get what I want. (These forces are real. Racism does exist, and the average woman can't do as many push ups as the average man.)

Thus, the goal of modern politics seeks the destruction of the external causes of injustice. Let me introduce a theological idea here. Injustice is sin, and thus, human justice seeks the destruction of external "sinful" structures.

Modern Christian Views of Justice

So what does all of this have to do with the gospel? In short, politically conservative and liberal Christians reflect conservative and liberal gospels. How one views justice will determine how one engages the world with the truth of Christ. Both mistakenly view justice as a largely external issue.

Modern conservative evangelicals focus on the gospel as the answer to the need for personal salvation from sin. The justice they are most concerned with is the forensic justice of St. Paul (e.g., "For the wages of sin is death"). This has colored their view of social action in profound ways. Politically, they don't want the government to intervene in issues like income redistribution (which they don't see as a problem), but they do want the government to intervene on issues like drug use or pornography. In short, conservative evangelical Christians seek to destroy sin by destroying the external "causes" of particular sins. They are no less prone to use the coercive power of the state than the "big government" liberals they claim to oppose.

Liberal social gospel Christians err in the opposite direction. They align themselves with political forces that decry attempts to enforce personal morality—largely because the liberal denominations which many of them come from downplay or deny the personal and exclusivist nature of Christ's gospel. Their social action compels them to try and change the larger, structural forces which they see as the root of other particular social evils. They view poverty as exclusively structural, rather than also personal, and ignore the anomalies. (For example, if external structures are the cause of all poverty, then why isn't everybody poor? If the system unfairly discriminates in favor of Asians—as some non-Asian groups insist—why don't all Asians prosper?) The bottom line is that like their conservative counterparts, liberal Christians

are seeking power solutions to external problems. Conservatives and liberals merely differ on what problems merit our attention. Both miss the larger picture.

Is human justice possible? Human history clearly indicates otherwise. God's command for us to do justice, then, must mean something other than human justice.

Divine Justice

Unfortunately, our human conceptions of justice have infected our conception of divine justice.

Divine justice is each of us getting what God thinks we deserve. And the cause of injustice is not external, but internal. Therefore, the object of divine justice is not the destruction of sin "out there" but rather the destruction of sin within me.

Clearly, God hates sin, but he is not destroyed by it—nor is sin destroyed in his presence. Why? In the very act of the creation of morally autonomous creatures (angels and humans), the omniscient God knew that sin would happen. And yet knowing that it would happen, he also made provision for its eventual destruction. God's problem is not sin, but love. He loves us and has set us free to choose to love him or not. As we choose not to love him, we sin, and all the ugliness and pain in the world flows from this denial of God.

Whenever God acts justly, he acts in such a way that it destroys sin. We often misinterpret this to mean that God seeks to destroy sinners. In fact, God always seeks to preserve ("save") sinners while destroying sin within "saved" people. (That is why divine justice and divine mercy cannot be separated.) God is so serious about the destruction of sin within people that he will live among them, become one of them (though himself sinless), and even to die for them in their place to pay the penalty of their sin. There is no length that the Hound of Heaven will not go to in order to help us root out sin within us. But he won't do it without our active participation.

What then is divine justice? It's each of us getting what God thinks we deserve. Divine justice looks down on fallen humanity—men and women who bear the divine image and likeness—and he comes to a startling conclusion. "I made these children. They are as morally autonomous as I am. But I am the Creator; they are the creation. Even though they made the wrong choice to sin, I think that they deserve to have sin destroyed in their lives. Yes, they must bear the consequences of their sin, but I will bear the responsibility of paying for the penalty of their sin." In other

words, because God is sinless, and because we are made in his image, we also deserve (according to him, not us!) to be sinless. His own sense of justice demands this.

I have made the case that in human terms, each of us demands what we think is our fair share. In our sinfulness, we usually ask amiss. If we truly desire justice for ourselves and others, we must ask God to reveal to us what He thinks is our fair share. We can solve Arrow's Paradox this way: Let God tell each of us what the priorities are for our lives, and let us trust him for the outcome. This is hard stuff. As we cry out for justice to God, are we willing to risk the possibility that he thinks we already have it? We call justice getting what we think we deserve. So does God. Divine justice is achieved when each of us gets what God thinks we deserve.

God's justice is not our own because we are not God. Our wickedness prevents us from perfectly perceiving what justice is for ourselves and for each other, let alone achieving it. But God, being perfect—and most importantly, being just in his very person and nature—is incapable of anything other than justice. For humans, justice is a noun; it is a thing achieved or denied. For God, it is being. A perfectly just God can only do justice.

This is really good news. What humanity has longed strived for and could not achieve by its own means is now promised to occur. We cry out for justice because of sin; because of sin we cannot achieve it. Through the destruction of sin within us, we will experience the destruction of injustice and the triumph of justice "out there." That is the ultimate hope. But what about today? The command in Micah is for the here and now. Again, we cannot achieve human justice in human terms in this life. But each of us is being commanded to strive to be just; and as just-ness grows in each human heart, then more justice will be accomplished in the world.

There are some practical aspects to divine justice that we can seek to accomplish now. Nowhere in the biblical text is justice defined as everybody getting what they think is their fair share. Nor does it suggest equality of outcome. The Bible does admonish us to be strong for those who are weak, to speak for those who have no voice, to show no favoritism to the rich and powerful, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, etc. In other words, each of us must meet people at their point of need—just as God does—out of love, not compulsion. The gospel does not give us a voting madate to compel others to be just or do justice.

But wasn't Jesus concerned with social issues? Yes, of course. Yet Jesus did not abolish poverty, rail against the unequal distribution of wealth, or even condemn the more pernicious effects of racism and sexism. Instead, He called each of us to love God with all of our being, and to love

each other as we love ourselves. (He even commanded us to love our enemies—the ones who oppress us unjustly.) Why? Because God is interested in something far more important than forensic justice. If Jesus' only goal was to abolish the institution of slavery, he would have called for its destruction. But God was less interested in freeing the slaves of Rome than he was in freeing the slaves of sin. By calling each of us slaves to sin and offering freedom from it, Jesus is sending a more powerful and transformational message that we all were designed for freedom from all forms of sin, including owning slaves and being owned as a slave. Spartacus sought freedom from slavery, and won his freedom (temporarily) through force and the destruction of his masters. But both Spartacus and his slave masters died in sin. To what eternal advantage? Christ offers us freedom from sin which is an offer, if we took it seriously, that would free every slave from both human and spiritual bondage both now and forever. You and I would demand that slave owners give up their slaves; Jesus makes the wholly uncoercive offer to the slave owners: Become my Slave, and in so doing, free yourself. (Even as I write these words, something in me is repulsed by the idea of not exercising force on behalf of the oppressed, which reveals to me that I have more of Judas Iscariot in me than I care to admit.)

But there's more to the story. We have the divine mandate to act with justice, and divine justice is our model. But God's justice is connected to the equally difficult concept of mercy. Human beings can never achieve "justice" through the coercive use of power over other human beings. (Benign neglect is also not terribly effective.) But the fact that I use force to do this does nothing to change you. We can make things better or worse by our actions and inactions, and we are commanded to act in such a way as to make things better, but we fool ourselves into thinking that either human justice is ever accomplished through human action alone. This has been the error of the Social Gospel.

This leaves us with an enormous difficulty: the Gospel Paradox, if you will. If we are incapable of achieving justice in either a perfect or even in a relative sense, why then does God command us to do it? The command to love justice is like many other commands in the Bible (e.g., love your neighbor as yourself). God frequently asks us to do things that we cannot achieve without divine assistance. And why does he do that? Because a) it forces us to rely on his power, wisdom and grace rather than our own and; b) it is transformational.

Why does God save us? And what is it that he is saving? There is a sense in which salvation is not only past and future, but also ongoing, a process most Christians describe as "sanctification." God wants to redeem all of our being—heart, mind, soul and strength—and this occurs only as we submit each under God's dominion. We are being transformed as we rely upon his power,

wisdom and grace and consciously decide to obey him to accomplish that which we cannot accomplish on our own. Someone once asked Mother Teresa how to learn how to love, and her response was, “Go and love.” In other words, we learn to love by loving, we learn to do justice by trying to do it. But most importantly, we become loving people and we become just people as we practice the exercise of each in him. This is sanctification by any other name.

Human and Divine Mercy

In strictly human terms, if we truly desire absolute justice in the earth, we must destroy the sources of injustice. History is full of violent energy aimed at the destruction of unjust structures and systems. In the United States, slavery was rightly viewed as an unjust institution, but the destruction of slavery did not result in the destruction of past injustice and its effects nor of hate, of racism, or the ultimate cause of each, sin. Ultimately, if we cry out for the destruction of injustice, we are crying out for the destruction of sin, and sin is the product of morally autonomous creatures. Taken to its logical extreme, the demand for justice is the demand for the destruction of sinners. This is justice through jihad.

If God were only motivated by the desire to destroy sin, then he never would have created humanity, or, having done so, would have strangled us in the cradle. Why? Every human heart has the capacity for sin. If God wants to destroy sin in the world, he must destroy the world’s sinners. Why doesn’t God do so?

Because God loves people as much as he hates sin. His objective is not only the destruction of sin. For God, justice and mercy are co-mingled; two inseparable sides of the same divine coin. For humans, mercy and justice are polar opposites. We view justice as an outcome, e.g., a jail term for a crime committed. We view mercy as the abrogation of that jail term. Human justice is denied by human mercy. But divine justice and divine mercy are only possible as both are operational. That is why we are commanded to do justice and love mercy. Divine justice points out the error of sin and seeks its destruction. God’s mercy seeks to preserve the vessel being cleansed of sin.

There are several implications of this view which are deeply disturbing. In divine terms, we are not called to demand justice from those who oppress us. Why? Because while we were yet enemies with God, Christ died for us. God did not demand that we stop sinning before he would provide an atonement. Neither can we demand that unjust people stop being unjust. (How else should unjust people act?) God calls the righteous to love their enemies so that they can see an

alternative to unrighteousness and be transformed by it. This is not a divine call to inaction, but rather to the counter-intuitive response of love to hate—a far more difficult task than "zero tolerance" justice.

A second implication is that God requires us to forgive our enemies—and not only after the fact. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do" is the prayer Jesus made, hovering a few feet above the men who nail-gunned him into the tree. Reconciliation begins with the oppressed offering forgiveness, rather than demanding that the oppressor beg for it.

This leads to a third implication. We are to love mercy as much as we hate injustice. We like to say that we hate the sin but love the sinner. Are we telling the truth? Probably not. In human terms, it's hard to love the thing that produces the thing that you hate. We hate Rome that enslaves us and our Roman masters who own us. Without the command to love mercy, we fall into the trap of hating both the sin and the sinner.

If what I have written so far is true, then I have come to a very uncomfortable conclusion. What God is calling me to is beyond me. Where do I find the strength and the courage to embrace the Gospel Paradox to both do justice and love mercy?

Walking Humbly

The final piece we need to solve the Gospel Paradox is the desire to walk humbly with God. Do we recognize our own sin? Do we repent of it? Do we see our own infinite capacity for greed and deception, lust and murder? Tyrants, death camp commanders, and Grand Dragons are never marked by humility. Neither are people who steal cars or computer software from a local retailer. When we commit crimes against others—no matter what the justification—we show no respect for the other person or for God. When we hold all others as more wicked than we are, we show no respect for the truth of our own sinfulness. This is raging pride.

Humility is the opposite of pride. Humility is the mind of Christ that we are supposed to have as well. Humility led omnipotent, eternal God to take on the form of a weak and finite slave. Pride exercises power; humility eschews it. The Roman cross is a symbol of prideful power exercised in the name of peace. But Jesus—King of Kings, Lord of Lords and the Prince of Peace—submitted himself to that awful engine as the ultimate act of humility. The justice and mercy we receive from the Cross would have been vitiated without the humility of Christ preceding it. Humility will undo Satan's kingdom because prideful power throbs throughout its darkened

heart. That's why Satan tempted Jesus in the desert with power. Why then do we seek to exercise the very power Christ rejected in the name of Christ?

To borrow a phrase, "imagine" a world in which every person walked away from pride and power, but rather embraced humility before God, love of mercy, and just actions. These qualities cannot be imposed from without, but are only had as a "spring welling up" within us as a result of a salvific encounter with God.

Concluding the Matter

I am of the already/not yet school. I believe that Jesus inaugurated his Kingdom when he first came, and that it will be fully instituted as he rules and reigns on earth during the Millennium and beyond. In the interim—in the long shadow of expectation and struggle—we are called to continue what he only could begin, and what he alone can complete. He has left us here to struggle with the issues of justice and mercy so that we might exercise them rightly when he does return, and in the process, become more like him. We can only do this by the counter-intuitive movement toward humility. We must resist the temptation of power to achieve justice. Apart from God, our pride compels us to force others to be good—something God himself never attempts. Humility forces us to acknowledge that it is we who are not good, and thus extend mercy to those who oppress us. Humility empowers us to do justice and love mercy. It enables the gospel in us and through us. Any gospel—liberal or conservative—that does not enjoin us to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before God is a false one.

m.m.