

JESUS JUSTICE

SO EASY A FIVE-YEAR-OLD CAN DO IT

joy will be theirs.

justice. God's Kingdom, on earth

Justice is so easy even a five-year-old can do it.

It took me a long time to figure that out. Even though I've spent the better part of a lifetime committed to the idea of justice, determined to live for justice, I really couldn't define it until last year. My latest journey toward better understanding why Jesus loves justice began roughly last March when I was asked to sit on a social justice panel at the 2006 Urban Youth Workers Institute (UYWI), and the moderator told the panelists he would begin by asking us to define it.

In preparation I reminisced about a political theory class in which the professor began every lecture with the same question—"What is justice?"—without ever arriving at an answer. That class was no different from the politicized rhetoric from pro-war/anti-war, pro-abortion/anti-abortion, pro-gay/anti-gay, pro-green/anti-green crusaders who describe justice so differently. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography came to mind: "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced...But I know it when I see it."

That's exactly how I felt about justice: "I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it."

Then Bart Campolo answered a similar question on his blog, and it's the most satisfying definition I've seen: "Social justice, as I understand it, is when everybody gets what he or she truly needs in order to realize his or her fullest potential as a lover of God and as a lover of other people."

But still I yearned for more, something that spoke of justice as an action word. So I answered the question on the panel by acknowledging my difficulty and ultimately dancing around it.

At the same time, World Vision, Fuller Seminary, and UYWI asked me to facilitate a yearlong social justice initiative in which defining it was critical to the project. I said yes, knowing full well that I'd serve the process more as a student than an expert. Later I was asked to contribute two chapters on the subject to an upcoming book, *Deep Justice in a Broken World* (YS). Again I agreed, despite feeling unqualified to help clarify for others what was still so mushy for me.

Then Judah—my son, my muse—intervened. He helped me make sense of it all.

Righting Wrongs

During our August vacation, Judah wanted to know why I needed to take a break from playtime to participate on a conference call. I told him about the book project. He asked what it was about. I mentioned justice. He didn't understand. Could I please explain what justice was?

Uh, no I couldn't. But as Judah probed more, it finally came to me. It was one of those "a-ha" moments that only a child (who was still five at the time) can inspire.

"Justice," I told him, "is about righting wrongs."

It's why Jesus came—to right the wrongs of sin in our lives in order to restore relationship with him—and he expects no less from us.

While Judah and I spoke that afternoon, I remembered that this wasn't the first time he helped me make sense of justice.

"Why?"

"Why didn't we help that man?"

As Judah's confused yet compassionate eyes gazed at mine, his words cut deep. We had just passed a panhandler in Chinatown on the way to introduce mom to soupy dumplings. I had taken him the night before, just the two of us, on a father-son outing. He enjoyed the dumplings so much—and the practice chopsticks the waiter taught him how to use—that he wanted to bring mom the next night.

What do you mean, "Why didn't we help?" I thought. *We're on family time.* The rationalization didn't cut it for me, however, so I figured it would mean even less to him. So I promised Judah that if the man was still there after we ate, we would give him some money.

On the way back to the car, we passed the man a second time. No longer panhandling, he sat on a stoop with his head between his legs. I gave Judah a handful of coins and took him to the man. "Excuse me," I said. "My son has something he wants to give you."

Slowly the man raised his head and watched Judah approach, hand outstretched. The man grabbed his hand and with tears welling up in his eyes, said, "God loves you, boy." Later Judah offered him his ice cream cone and the tears streamed down the man's face.

The ice broken, the man introduced himself as Lonnie. He said he'd been strung out for 30 years and homeless for 25. At one time he was a Christian, but he turned his back on God and became hooked on crack cocaine and alcohol. He said he'd been off drugs for 12 years, but he couldn't shake the booze. He wept as he told me that Judah was the sixth person who'd stopped to show him God's love that day.

He kept saying he was scared—afraid that he would go to sleep and not wake up. Judah looked at him lovingly, straight in the eyes and said: "Everyone is scared of something." With that, more tears.

Lonnie was chilly, so we gave him Judah's beach towel from the car, and a brand new Bible I had bought for myself that weekend. Lonnie asked if Judah would pray for him. He did, along with mom and dad.

There we stood, on the corner of Bayard and Mott Streets, around the corner from the ice cream shop, minutes removed from soupy dumplings, spending quality time with Jesus—in the person of a homeless man.

"Inasmuch as you've [loved] the least of these," Jesus said, "you've done it unto me."

Family time, indeed. The best kind.

Restoring. Renewing. Reconciling

Eighteen months later, Judah still prays for Lonnie at bedtime. What's so striking to me is not *that* he prays (which, as his dad, I think is pretty cool in itself), but rather *how* he prays: "God, help Lonnie not be homeless anymore. Give him a home."

After our conversation last August, I realized that Judah had been praying like this all along. Intuitively, this little

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boy understood that justice is more than just acknowledging difficulties when they exist. It's more than just covering problems with Band Aids, masking symptoms, or throwing money at them to make them go away.

Justice is about righting the underlying wrongs that create the problems in the first place. It's about restoring balance, renewing hope, and reconciling fractured communities.

Shalom

The concept of *shalom* expresses this best. In his book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, British theologian N.T. Wright describes biblical justice as “putting the world to rights.” It’s the fulfillment, as Paul wrote, of all creation’s waiting “in eager expectation” to be “liberated from its bondage to decay” (Romans 8:19-23), or what the Old Testament calls *shalom*.

More than simply the absence of strife, *shalom* is the kind of peace that holds the far reaches of the universe together. It’s what the Prince of Peace came to re-establish by overcoming the devastating consequences of sin: The interdependency of healthy communities; the functioning of our physiology; the manifold mysteries of a mother’s love; the splendor of the cosmos; and the microscopic intricacy of subatomic matter.

Dr. Tim Keller, founder and senior pastor of Manhattan’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church, describes *shalom* as the webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in a state of universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight. It’s an intricately woven garment that diminishes when things unravel physically, psychologically, and economically. Social unraveling comes when people who “have” hold on to their blessing rather than thrusting it out and interweaving it with those who “have not.”

The condition of sin robs us of *shalom*, which Kingdom justice restores. The catch is that justice isn’t forced upon us. It comes as we change our priorities and hunger and thirst after it with a poverty of spirit that allows us to mourn its absence.

Kids know this well. Cries of fairness ring out on playgrounds every day. Prayers to heal broken relationships echo in homes every night.

But somehow as we age, the belief that things can fundamentally change tends to diminish. At the very least, lifetimes of hurt and disappointment jade us. Sometimes they make us cynical. And we forget that justice is possible.

Perhaps that’s why Jesus said we must first become like children before we can enter his Kingdom.

Another Son

Judah’s not the first son who embodied justice for his father.

There’s this teenage boy I know. He appears ordinary enough, with nothing much to distinguish himself except that he’s

studious and works with his stepdad in construction. Like many teenagers he’s struggling to find his place and feels like a curiosity.

Living in the ghetto is hard, especially since he just immigrated to the neighborhood in the last few years. Try as he might, he hasn’t mastered the accent and local customs. And forget the slang; that’s like learning a third language. Worse, the old-timers all seem to know something about him that he hasn’t figured out yet. He gets the distinct impression that they talk about his family, reinforced by the overheard name-calling. His peers can be especially cruel, teasing him to his face and instigating fights after school. The soldiers occupying the streets find the bullying funny.

Sometimes the mocking gets to him. He wants desperately to fight back, but mom forbids it, promising that someday the rejection will make sense. He tries to take comfort in her words, but for now his heart just hurts, and the unfairness makes him angry.

So he sneaks off to the outskirts of town and hides behind a gnarly old sycamore tree. There he remembers the hunger and loneliness of the refugee camp and recollects vague memories of a midnight flight from the small town where he spent his childhood. The details are sketchy, but he recalls stories of bloodshed and murder that he barely escaped. Not fitting in has been a recurring struggle for him.

Then his memories fade, and he hears the echo of mom’s voice telling him about his birth. No way would his schoolmates ever find out he was born in a barn. Imagine the ammunition that would give them! They already call him choice animal names.

But really, why did he have to be born in a stable, surrounded by donkey dung and cow manure? And why did it matter that Joseph wasn’t his real dad? And why did the gossips congregating at the stoop down the street call him a bastard and his mother a whore? Even if that was true, what business was it of theirs? And why did they disdain him as if he should be dead?

Perhaps you know this friend of mine. No longer a nameless and faceless teenager, his name is revered and reviled around the world, and artists have imagined his likeness for centuries. In case you missed it in Sunday school, this boy we call Jesus Christ.

Been There, Done That

When the King of Kings decided to usher his Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven,” he penetrated class lines to do so—not as a well-intentioned outsider but from within the community. He “became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood,” (John 1:14, *The Message*) and his manner of doing so invited scorn.

He was born into straw poverty made worse by political exile, and lived as an immigrant teenager in the ghetto. (“What good comes out of Nazareth?”) He worked his ministry with no place

to lay his head; made his last trip on a borrowed donkey; spent his last evening alive in a borrowed room; watched his lone possession, a robe, become a gambler's prize at his death; and was buried in a borrowed tomb.

He's been there, done that, and overcome it so that he can meet the marginalized and exploited among us—those he called “the least of these brothers of mine”—and empower them to right the wrongs that got them there.

The beauty of the Gospel is that its justice extends both to the socio-economically marginalized and the well off. It's the great equalizer. Jesus went so far as to begin his longest recorded sermon, the one that spells out for the rest of his Kingdom values, with the counterintuitive idea: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 5:3). When we recognize that the economically poor and spiritually poor are the same apart from Christ's grace, we embark on the path of Kingdom justice.

Jesus' Ministry

When this son grew up, he began his ministry by declaring his heart for justice—not in some abstracted cliché but in concrete statements about his mission and his anointing. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,” he announced, “because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus defined his mission as jubilee—the “year of the Lord's favor”—by quoting Isaiah 61, which describes a God who provides comfort for those who mourn, exchanges beauty for ashes and praise for despair, rebuilds ancient ruins, and restores places long devastated. “Instead of their shame,” Isaiah concludes, “my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance...and everlasting joy will be theirs. For I, the Lord, love justice” (Isaiah 61:1-8).

And that mission is not limited to the evangelical dichotomy of personal righteousness or social justice. God's Kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven, offers both.

“Do This, and You Will Live”

Jesus loves justice so much that he built it into his response to the most fundamental of evangelical questions: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The question sounds innocent enough, but its questioner, a lawyer, was attempting to test Jesus. Jesus deftly turns the tables. “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” he asked.

The man replied simply: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus said. “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:25-28).

Do *this*, and you will *live*. Coming from Jesus, those six





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little words burst with meaning. The unending life he offers brings joy and peace and abundance, and its citizenship rests in his Kingdom. If that's the life to which we aspire, we must first understand "this" thing he requires of us.

Beyond the 'Salvation Formulation'

Curiously, "this" is not the salvation formulation we evangelicals typically describe. There's nothing in the lawyer's response about repeating a prayer or responding to an altar call or attending a 12-week discipleship class. Instead, this life he promises grows in proportion to obedience to three—not two—commands.

It begins by loving God and receiving the grace that love offers.

It continues by loving your neighbor.

And it's sustained, perhaps most difficult of all, by loving ourselves enough to receive God's justice in our own lives.

This third command is easy to overlook. Still, it's there as the standard by which the other two are measured. It's there when Jesus explains how we love God: with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. If we resent who we are—if we think we're not smart enough or too weak or too unattractive or too emotional—then we're withholding our love for God.

God wants us in our entirety, withholding nothing. It's also there when Jesus says love your neighbor "as yourself." Kingdom love for neighbor requires first appreciating and respecting who the King made us to be. Apostle Paul calls this offering ourselves as, "a living sacrifice...our reasonable act of worship" (Romans 12:1-3). Everything else, including the capacity to view our neighbors through the prism of Heaven, flows from that.

Who Is My Neighbor?

The lawyer understood the self-love part of the equation. Brimming with self-confidence, he was, after all, attempting to trap the incarnated Word in a battle of words. But "wanting to justify himself," he comes back for more and asks the critical question: "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus responds with a parable (as so many of his stories are) about a man on a journey. On an isolated stretch of road, thieves rob him, beat him, and leave him for dead, battered and bloodied in a ditch. In time, the local priest (or, in our context, the pastor) passes by on his way to the synagogue (a.k.a., the church). Too hurried to stop, he crosses the street and pretends not to notice. Then a Levite (the worship leader) also approaches, perhaps on the way to the same church. He follows the pastor's lead and similarly ignores the man.

Then a Samaritan rounds the corner. Unlike the pastor and worship leader, he doesn't pretend not to see. Kingdom compassion compels him to right wrongs wherever he finds them, so he rolls up his sleeves and prepares to get dirty. In the process, this righteous Samaritan extended justice where a self-righteous pastor would not.

Why a Samaritan?

Why did Jesus make the "neighbor" in his story a Samaritan? Why not the priest or the Levite? Why not a Jewish layman? The Jews to whom he was preaching, even Jesus' own disciples, reviled Samaritans. Most infamously, in Luke 9—the chapter before this parable—Jesus rebuked James and John (the disciple whom "he loved") for praying that fire would consume a Samaritan village.

Samaritans were hated because they descended from Assyrian soldiers who centuries earlier had conquered Israel and marched all the able-bodied survivors across the desert as slaves. The infirmed and vulnerable who were left behind—women, children, and the elderly—were pillaged and raped. When exiled Jews returned years later, they found children fathered by the Assyrian conquistadors. These they called Samaritans, and their presence in Israel reminded Jews of slavery, colonialism, and injustice.

Yet this Samaritan's love mirrors God's Kingdom love. "Go and do likewise," Jesus tells the lawyer.

Learn to love like this Samaritan loved. Then you'll truly live.

Beyond Compassion

How the Samaritan demonstrated love is much the same way my son prays for Lonnie. The Samaritan understood that Kingdom love moves beyond compassion to justice.

Compassion compelled the Samaritan to respond to the bloody mass of human flesh beside the road. But justice kept him there. Kingdom justice required him to get dirty, and restoring *shalom* meant overcoming the absence of adequate remedies for the battered man's need. There was no 911 operator to call or even the technology to reach out for help. There were no EMTs to provide urgent care and high-speed transports to a hospital. There wasn't an appropriate health-care facility nearby, and no insurance or Medicaid to finance treatment.

Yet *shalom* came to the man because the Samaritan was willing not only to sit with him in the ditch, give him water, and bandage his wounds (a compassionate response), but also to transport him to an inn, personally nurse him overnight, and prepay his medical expenses. Compassion, as commonly practiced in evangelical ministries today, would have served the man but stopped short of healing him. Instead, Jesus justice righted the wrongs that left him in the ditch. Jesus justice healed him, reconciled him, and restored him to wholeness.

Understood and Embodied

Jesus righted the wrongs in our lives—restored us to justice—by laying down his life so that we might truly live.

Five-year olds understand that.

The Samaritan, marginalized though he was, embodied it. Will you? ☺



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