

Social Injustice

Let Justice Flow

Amos 2:6-16

Pastor Bryan Clark

How would you define the term *social justice*? One of the challenges in having discussion around these topics is so many of these terms are so politically charged that immediately people identify some political agenda with the terminology. As long as we lock these terms into political agendas, we will make *no* progress. So here is what I'm asking of you: to trust me when I say that there's no political agenda behind this discussion. I'm not pushing the right; I'm not pushing the left. I am seeking to push God's agenda, so we will seek to define these terms as God defines them.

So with that in mind, how do we define social justice? The best way to understand it is around two very significant Hebrew words. One is the word that's typically translated righteous. The other is around the term typically translated justice. The term righteous is the Hebrew word *tzadeqah*. When we think of righteousness, we think of a righteous person; we typically think about someone who holds to a certain code of ethics or personal integrity. While that is certainly true, that's not the essence of the word *tzadeqah*. As a matter of fact, it's much more social in nature. The term is referring to one who is rightly related to God. That's really the essence of the term—one who is rightly related to God—but the outflow of that right relationship with God is a longing to put right all other relationships, regardless of race, regardless of social status; I would say regardless of political affiliation—but simply seeing people as people made in the image of God. So as you are rightly related to God, the outflow of that is a desire to put right all other relationships.

Dr. Bruce Waltke is arguably one of the greatest Hebrew scholars in the last one hundred years. He spent considerable time going through the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and Proverbs and trying to sort out what biblically is the definition of the *righteous* versus the *wicked*. That's the contrast we see over and over again in the Old Testament. After extensive research, his conclusion was this: that when the term *tzadeqah* (righteous) is used, it is referring to one who is willing to disadvantage himself in order to advantage the greater community. The wicked then, in contrast to that, would be one who is willing to disadvantage the community in order to advantage himself. It's a very helpful understanding and we'll bring that back off and on throughout our study.

The second key term is the term *mishpat*, typically translated justice. The term simply means giving one his due—justice. It revolves around three basic areas: giving someone their due as it relates to punishment, as it relates to protection, as it relates to care—regardless of race, social status or political affiliation. Now when you are talking about protection, you are not just talking about protection from violence; you are talking about protection from all of the standards and the structures and the things in society that prey on the weak and the vulnerable, that give them an unfair shot at life. When the Bible talks about those who are most at risk, it would typically be referring to four categories: the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, and the poor. It would be an interesting discussion as to who are these people in our culture today—those who are most at risk, those who are most vulnerable.

If you take those two terms and put them together: *tzadeqah* and *mishpat*, you really have how God would define social justice. As a matter of fact, it's common that those two terms show up together.

They are kind of a couplet—happens over thirty-six times in the Old Testament—and it will happen in the Book of Amos. Anytime you see that, if you simply insert the words *social justice*, you would have an accurate reflection of what the text is meant to communicate. With that in mind, I would invite you to turn with us this morning to the Old Testament Book of Amos.

If you were not with us last week, we started the study in the Book of Amos. Chapter 1, verse 1, all the way through Chapter 2, verse 5 is what we covered last week. There were seven warnings from the roaring Lion. The text opens by saying the Lion is roaring, which is a reference to God—that God simply isn't going to put up with what is happening anymore. There's a message to seven different nations for the atrocities against human dignity and God, because of His love and compassion, can't just sit by and watch it continue. So He basically says He's going to step in and He's going to stop it. The northern tribes of Israel make up what is referred to as Israel, contrasted with Judah in the South. They were probably applauding the words of Amos because they believed that these other nations were wicked, were problematic, and it's about time God stepped up and did something. They would maybe have imagined that they would even have been the instruments that God would use to punish those surrounding nations and perhaps take what they had for themselves. They were living in a time of great prosperity, a time of peace, a time of wealth, a time of luxury. In their minds that would have translated into the idea that God is very happy with us because blessing meant God is for us; God is happy with us. So they would have been very shocked when this judgment formula turns on them as it does in verse 6:

**Thus says the LORD,
“For three transgressions of Israel and for four
I will not revoke its punishment... (*NASB, Amos 2:6a)**

If you were here last week, you heard that seven times. That's the judgment formula—that God is going to deal with them. Now Israel hears it coming at them. That must have been quite a shock. What's the problem?

**...Because they sell the righteous for money
And the needy for a pair of sandals. (Vs. 6b)**

Now, again, going back into an ancient culture and understanding the dynamics that are quite different than our culture today, the nation of Israel was a theocracy. God was the King, then a human king, but the people of God were the government; the people of God were the judicial system. It was a theocracy; it was quite unique. In the midst of all of that, the law was very clear, that in order to survive as a people—you know, “We are in this together,” kind of a thing—that if someone had a need, it was the responsibility of those with more to lend them what they needed in order to get by, in order to survive. And they were not to charge interest. Today a bank or a lending agency charges interest; it's a business transaction. There's nothing wrong with that. Everybody understands the terms going in and actually it helps a lot of people. But it wasn't a business transaction in ancient Israel. It was meant to be a way to hold the community together so they could survive. So the law was very clear about that. What was happening here is the righteous—that's our word *tzadeqah*—(these are people that genuinely were seeking to disadvantage themselves for the greater advantage of the community) meant they were trying their hardest to hold things together, to make sure that everybody was fed, sheltered and cared for. But in the process of that, they themselves were running low. They didn't have what they needed to survive. And so the wealthy were offering them a loan. But the moment they couldn't immediately pay back the loan,

they would sell them into slavery. Even though this was legal, there are a lot of things that are legal but they are not morally right. So they would go to the judicial system and say: this person owes me; he can't pay it and the verdict would be, then, they must be sold into slavery.

Now imagine the impact on the social fabric of the nation. During the time of tremendous wealth, these are husbands, these are wives, these are mothers, these are fathers, these are brothers, these are sisters, and immediately when they are sold into slavery, there's an impact. And the culture starts to unravel; the community starts to unravel—and then it's another one; then it's another one; then it's another one. And pretty soon it's unraveling the very social fabric of the community—all around one person who chose to disadvantage the community in order to advantage himself. So that's what he's referring to them there.

**They (*meaning the wealthy*) sell the righteous for money
And the needy for a pair of sandals.**

The needy would be the poor, the orphan, the immigrant, the vulnerable, the at-risk. These are the ones that also needed a loan. But they obviously could not pay back the loan, so they are immediately sold into slavery, creating this chaos in the social fabric of the community. The idea of **a pair of sandals** was kind of a Hebrew cliché to say probably what we would say today, *next to nothing*. That's how we would say it. They were sold into slavery for next to nothing. It was nothing more than the price of a pair of sandals. So here you have the wealthy, who are living lives of luxury, who have more sandals than they know what to do with, and they are willing to sell someone into slavery for next to nothing, just because they can, just to advantage themselves and it's creating chaos throughout the community. Verse 7:

“These who pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of the helpless...

Now there're several of these verses that are kind of messy in Hebrew and there's a lot of discussion what exactly is meant. This one can go two ways. If you take the word **pant**, it's just simply saying these people are actually *passionate* about rubbing the faces of the poor in it. In other words they trample on their heads; they trample their faces into the dust and find some strange delight in that—in order to make themselves seem *more*, in order to make themselves seem like they're somehow better. Or the word **pant** could be translated *trample*, which just again carries the idea that they trample the faces of the poor in the dust in order to advantage themselves. And they have no compassion, no sense of human dignity. They...

... Also turn aside the way of the humble; (Vs. 7b)

The phrase **turn aside** is a legal phrase. It would be saying that when these people appeal to the legal system, which is the only place they can turn, the legal system has been bought out by the rich; it's bought out by the wealthy. So the verdict always goes in favor of the rich. There's nowhere to turn—they have no solution. So the community is coming unraveled. You have a handful of people advantaging themselves at the cost of the social fabric of the community. He says,

And a man and his father resort to the same girl... (Vs. 7c)

What he's saying there is a father and a son are both having relations with the same girl—and the girl is a slave girl, is a maid in the home. Basically the train of thought goes like this: they loan this

money that can't be paid back; they sell them into slavery and then, as a slave girl, both the father and the son have their way with this girl. It just shows you the total lack of human dignity that describes this community.

I do think it's interesting that Amos brings up the idea of sexual sin in the context of social justice. We don't tend to think of it that way. But it is interesting to process that. What is he saying? Now when you think about it, what is sexual sin, as defined by God, other than it's stealing? It's taking something that doesn't belong to you with the understanding that it's something you can never give back. It is advantaging myself at the great disadvantage of the community. It fits our definition perfectly. It is understanding that even if two people are consenting adults—this is kind of where we are at as a culture—as long as both people are consenting, it doesn't hurt anybody. That is ridiculous! It hurts everybody! Our sexual promiscuity as a community, as a nation, is causing the social fabric of our communities to completely unravel. Think about it. Millions and millions and millions of dollars go to deal with this—to deal with the promiscuity, to deal with the diseases, to deal with the sexual violence, to deal with the addictions, to deal with unwed mothers, to deal with teenage moms, to deal with the poverty, to deal with families with no dads. It goes on and on and on. Millions and millions and millions of dollars are spent because of sexual promiscuity. It is people choosing to advantage themselves to the disadvantage of the community. Frankly, if we could get our sexual lives in order, there would be millions and millions and millions of dollars to help those who genuinely need it. It is at the core of social justice. It reminds us that before we point our fingers at injustices around the world, we remind ourselves that it's a good thing to buy a pair of shoes so that somebody in poverty gets a pair of shoes from the company, but before we go down that path too far, let's remind ourselves: social justice starts at home. And social justice means we need to operate our lives with a discipline of sexual integrity. He goes on at the end of verse 7 and says,

In order to profane My holy name.” (Vs. 7d)

In other words, what He's saying there is all of these things—the abuse of the poor, selling people into slavery, the corruption of the justice system, the sexual promiscuity—it all does violence to the name and reputation of God. These are supposed to be the people of God. How could they possibly treat people like this? So God is saying, *“You are just making a mockery of My Name. You are profaning My Name.”* Verse 8:

**“On garments taken as pledges they stretch out beside every altar,
And in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined.”**

Now this is going right down the line of profaning the name of God. He's describing these wealthy people—these people who are abusing others—as those who are trying to come off as good religious people. The idea of taking a garment as a pledge has to do with: if somebody owes you money—specifically the poor—and they can't pay you back, then you have the right to take their garment as collateral; it's the pledge. But the law required, at the end of every day, you must give the garment back so they don't freeze to death at night. So you can take it, but you can't treat them in such a way they are going to freeze to death. You have to give it back at the end of the day and take it back in the morning. But instead of giving it back, they are actually using it as a mattress to sleep on. This carries the idea that they are up at the altar, whether it's a pagan altar—the altar of gods—is a little hard to tell, but they are trying to communicate that they are really good religious folk. Not only do they not give the garment back, they have closets full of garments, but they don't want

to soil their own garments. So they are going to basically wreck the poor man's garment in order that theirs hang in pristine condition in the closet, so to speak. It's just their total disregard for another human being for the sake of having more.

The second example there is talking about if someone paid a fine with money or if someone paid a fine with wine—both were options—they were giving what they had. But these judges—these people in the system, by our language—were required to put the money in the budget in order to help meet needs. But instead of doing that, they were drinking the wine; they were having a party; they were getting drunk on this wine. So if it's money, they were buying. If it's wine, they were drinking it. So here they are—up at the altar—pretending to be good religious people, having this big party, getting drunk on what was needed in order to care for others. It's just a picture again of the total disregard for human dignity, of the social fabric of the community coming unraveled. In verses 9 through 12, God explains why this is just so heartbreaking to Him:

**“Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite before them,
Though his height was like the height of cedars
And he was strong as the oaks;
I even destroyed his fruit above and his root below.
It was I who brought you up from the land of Egypt,
And I led you in the wilderness forty years
That you might take possession of the land of the Amorite.
Then I raised up some of your sons to be prophets
And some of your young men to be Nazirites.
Is this not so, O sons of Israel?” says the LORD.
“But you made the Nazirites drink wine,
And you commanded the prophets saying, ‘You shall not prophesy!’” (Vs. 9-12)**

What God is saying is this: the reason this is so offensive to God is if it wasn't for God, you wouldn't have any of this. You wouldn't even be a nation; you wouldn't have peace; you wouldn't have wealth; you wouldn't have prosperity; you wouldn't have a life! God says, “I'm the One that made you into a nation; I'm the One that led you out of Egypt; I'm the One that led you in the wilderness; I'm the One that conquered the enemy; I'm the One that led you into the land; I'm the One who has taken care of you. I'm the One who prospered you. If it wasn't for Me, you wouldn't have anything—and this is what you do with what has been given!”

When he's talking about the **Nazarites**, he's talking about a group of people that took a vow called the Nazarite vow. Basically the idea of the vow was to be *set apart*. No wine, no lots of things, in order to be set apart for God. The idea was that they were meant to be a living metaphor. They constantly remind the people, “We are to be a set-apart people and we are to live our lives as a set-apart people for God.” But they actually corrupted the Nazarites. They turned them into drunkards.

Then he's talking about the **prophets**. God says, “I sent prophets to talk to you and tell you what you need to know—that you are off-track and here's what God wants from you. But you put a gag order on the prophets and you won't even let them speak.” God says, “After all I have done for you, this is how you respond!” And it breaks His heart.

One of the things that's interesting in the Old Testament is to look at the terminology used for giving to the poor, the orphan, the widow. When we think of doing that, we think of it in terms of

generosity; we think of it in terms of charity. But when you look at the Old Testament terminology, the term that's used is justice—*mishpat*. It's saying: This isn't just being generous; this isn't charitable giving. This is the right thing to do. The logic behind that is exactly what the text just talked about—and that is because, at the end of the day, God gave it to you. You didn't earn it; you didn't deserve it. At the end of the day, ninety-nine percent was God's and maybe one percent is yours, in terms of what was necessary to have what you have. You say, "Now wait a minute...wait a minute. You know I worked really hard; I went to college; I save; we make good decisions." "Fine, I understand that. That's your one percent." Ninety-nine percent you had no control over. You could not control what century you were born in. You could not control what family you were born into. You could not control whether you were born in the United States or in a rock quarry in India where you would spend your entire life, never leaving the quarry. You didn't have anything to say about that. You didn't have anything to say about the neighborhood that you grew up in. You didn't have anything to say about your talents and capacities. You didn't have anything to say about whether you would be healthy or not healthy, whether you would struggle with some lifelong disease or be healthy most of your life. You have no say in whether you would be hit by a drunk driver or not. You have no say in whether you have cancer, diabetes or any other disease. Ninety-nine percent of it, you have no control over. At the end of the day, those things are in God's hands and you have your one percent. So what God is saying is, "At the end of the day, you have what you have because of Me. If you think you are in control and you are the reason for all that you have, what happens tomorrow when the doctor calls and says, 'It's cancer.'" You suddenly realize there's very little in life I can control. It's ridiculous to think you are the one that's in control of all these."

But the fact of the matter is: we have what we have—and it's a reflection of God's goodness and God's grace and God's generosity. In the same way, those that have little: the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, the poor; it's the same argument. Those ten thousand children in poverty in Lincoln, they didn't ask for that; they didn't choose that; that wasn't their choice. They didn't choose what century they would be born in. They didn't choose what neighborhood they would live in. They didn't choose what amount of money their parents would have. They didn't choose a single parent family. It's true that people make bad choices and we can identify bad decisions in any socio-economic group of people. But the fact of the matter is the overwhelming majority of these people, they didn't choose that. It starts with the littlest things in their neighborhoods, their families, their dysfunction, and their schools and it just compounds to a point where they are devastated.

So what God is saying is, "Those of you that have, you didn't really choose that." That's God's goodness and grace. And those that's struggle, that really wasn't their choice either. So in the name of human dignity, can't we all get along by looking out for each other? Can't we be willing to disadvantage ourselves for the advantage of the greater community? As a people made in the image of God, can't we treat people with dignity? Can't there be protection? Can't there be compassion? Can't there be care? Even under the law, under punishment, can't there be equity, in that people are treated equally as human beings? That's the essence of the argument. God is saying, "If it's true that it's all Mine, then I want you to rightly distribute what you have in order to advantage the greater community." At the end of the day, it's justice. It's just simply the right thing to do. It's the way we love our neighbor as ourselves. Starting in verse 13 then God says, "Okay, you haven't listened. So here's the deal."

**"Behold, I am weighted down beneath you
As a wagon is weighted down when filled with sheaves. (Vs.13)**

Verse 13 is another one of *those*; it's all kind of mixed up in the Hebrew. I think what it's saying is: it's creating a metaphor for a wagon that's way overloaded and it kind of creaks and the wheels kind of wobble and it's barely able to move an inch at a time. What He's saying is, "That's going to be you as a nation. You are about to feel the weight of my judgment and you are barely going to be able to function. You are going to go from this luxury and prosperity to this weight of my judgment." He says:

**“Flight will perish from the swift,
And the stalwart will not strengthen his power,
Nor the mighty man save his life.
He who grasps the bow will not stand his ground,
The swift of foot will not escape,
Nor will he who rides the horse save his life.
Even the bravest among the warriors will flee naked in that day,” declares the
LORD.** (Vs. 14-16)

Basically He's just saying, "You can run but you can't hide. You are not going to win; you are not going to get away; you are going to avoid this." This is the deal. This prophecy was fulfilled about twenty-five to twenty-eight years later, in 722 B.C. when the Assyrians invaded the North, invaded Israel, captured Israel, desolated the land, and hauled them into seventy years of captivity.

What do we learn from this text? All through this study we are struck with the fact there isn't a one-to-one correlation. We are not a theocracy. The people of God don't run the government. They don't run the judicial system. You can't just apply straight over from that environment to this environment. So what do we do? Part of it is understanding that still, what doesn't change is: how God felt about that, is the same way God feels about it today—that there are always going to be orphans and widows and immigrants and poor. There's always going to be those that are disadvantaged by structures and systems; there's always going to be those that cry out for human decency. And what doesn't change is the fact that it breaks the heart of God and God expects His people to hear that cry and to do what we can do to make the social fabric of a community work.

Think of it this way: what if tomorrow morning, when you get up and go on your way, you begin to look for all the ways in which social injustice manifests itself in your world? How does it show up in your neighborhood? How does it show up in your school? How does it show up in your workplace? How does it show up in your business? How does it show up wherever you involve yourself? How does it show up in your industry? And instead of just shrugging your shoulders and saying, "That's too bad; that's the way it is," what if we, as the people of God, begin to dream about what could be different? What could be different if we really cared and begin to think about how we could change this, one person at a time?

One of the things that we as leaders constantly think about and wrestle with, is an issue of stewardship, as it relates to the church. One of the things that's unique about us is the fact that we are so large for the size of our community. On the national scale, the church isn't really large at all—but it is quite unusual for the size of the community, for the population base. Now there's never been a time when we sat down and thought, "How do we get big?" I've been here eighteen years. I don't ever remember a discussion, not a single discussion ever, on how do we get more people through the doors? It's always been, "How can we be faithful to the mission? But when you

are faithful to the mission, then God bless that with people. So one of the things we wrestle with is: We do have a lot of people and what is God asking us to do with that? The fact of the matter is we penetrate into every area of our city. We penetrate into the schools; we penetrate into the medical world; we penetrate into the business world; we penetrate into every neighborhood; we penetrate into the government—we penetrate into everything! So really, what would happen if the people of God begin to look at our community and say, “These are the areas where there’re structures, where there’re systems, where there’re behaviors that are just not right. They are just not fair; they don’t give people a chance.” And what would it be like if we began to dream about what could be different?

One of the things we need to, together, conclude is that the government is not the answer. The government has never been the answer. The government never will be the answer. If we look at the government programs and say, “Well, that’s too bad; they are not working,” that’s not acceptable. This is no disrespect to the government. I think especially when you are talking about local governments, these are the people that care; these are good people; these are the people who try to do their best to help a community. It’s not disrespectful to them. And actually to their defense, one of the reasons why government gets involved in so much stuff is because nobody else will. We all sit around and watch and finally the government says, “Somebody needs to do something.” Frankly, if the people in the community were doing their job, the government wouldn’t have to. So, at the end of the day, we have to own that fact—that it’s the people in the trenches; it’s the people on the ground; it’s the people that see what’s happening in the most ordinary events of the day that begin to see: these are the things that aren’t right. These are the things that, in the name of humanity, must change. And what would happen if we began to dream about how God might use us to change?

Remember just because something’s legal doesn’t mean something is morally right. It’s very common for people in certain industries to say, “That’s just the way the industry does it.” But what if it isn’t right? What if it isn’t fair? What if it doesn’t give those who are vulnerable a fair chance? Do we just say that’s the way the industry does it or do we begin to dream about a better way? What about my business? What about my school system? What about my neighborhood? What about my school? Just look in my world and say, “What isn’t right here?”

I just find myself wondering what would happen if we began to look at the world through God’s eyes, if we began to look at our community through God’s eyes and say, “There’re certain things that just aren’t acceptable and it shouldn’t be this way.” This isn’t New York City; this is Lincoln. We have a realistic possibility of dramatically changing our community. And if we change our community, maybe we could change our state. If we change our state, maybe it will bleed over to surrounding states. Who knows what God might do? But I find myself thinking, “Why not...Why not? If this breaks the heart of God, why not? And why not us? And why not now? Why not?”

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You love us. You have poured Your goodness out upon us. LORD, I do believe with all my heart, this room, this morning is filled with people who care. They really do. They love You. They want to do the right thing. But, LORD, sometimes, it’s just hard to see what isn’t right around us because we are just so used to it. LORD, I pray that You would give us eyes to see what isn’t right, what isn’t just, what isn’t fair, the

structures and the systems and the behaviors that unravel the social fabric of a community. LORD, we saw these statistics on the screen this morning. They are just unacceptable. LORD, if this breaks Your heart, I would have to believe that You would long to answer this prayer, that You would use us to radically bring about change in our community, that rather than Your name being profaned, Your name would be glorified. And the message of Jesus would be proclaimed. LORD, my prayer is that You would use us to make a difference. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

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Social Injustice

A Study in Amos

Let Justice Flow

Amos 2:6-16

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. How would you define “social justice”?
2. How does social justice differ from socialism or communism or other such ideas?
3. What do you think prevents a community from genuinely caring for those who are more vulnerable to injustices?

Bible Study

1. Review the big idea from Amos 1:1-2:5. What was God’s intent for the world and what does He see today? What would it mean for us to view the world as God sees it?
2. The idea of social justice in the bible is best defined around two key Hebrew terms: “righteousness” and “justice”. Righteous refers to a right relationship with God out of which flows the desire to put right all other relationships regardless of race, social or political status. The idea is primarily about restoring the fabric of a torn apart social community. Justice refers to giving people their due related to punishment, protection and care regardless of race, social or political status. The two terms appear together for example in these texts. As you read each text put the words “social justice” in for “righteousness and justice” and you get the idea.

Ps 9:16

Ps 33:5

Ps 11:7

Ps 9:8

Ps 97:1-2

Ps 103:6

Jer 9:23-24

One Hebrew scholar summarizes things by saying biblically the” righteous” refers to those who are willing to disadvantage themselves for the advantage of the community while the “wicked” refers to those who disadvantage the community for the sake of personal advantage.

3. Based on the discussion around question #2 can you come up with a working definition of social justice?
4. Read Amos 2:6-8. What are the issues God is addressing? How do they fit our definition above?
5. Read Amos 2:9-12. What is God's argument here? What has made it possible for the rich to be rich and the powerful to be powerful? Does God have a right to say how we should use what we have? Why or why not? How much control do you really have over all the factors that have led to what you have today?
6. Read Amos 2:12-16. What is God's response for the injustices that have been allowed?

Application

1. As the people of God we are surrounded by injustices every day. There are countless ways the structures and systems around us prey on the weak for the advantage of the strong. There are systems and structures and behaviors all around us that disadvantage the community for the sake of advantaging those who hold the power. Think about your circle of influence, your business, your school, your neighborhood, your industry, your government, etc... Where do you see this today?
2. Just because something is legal doesn't mean something is morally right. In the same way, just because that's the way the system works or the structure is set up doesn't mean we stand by and do nothing. Who will bring protection and care to the disadvantaged in this world if it's not the people of God?
3. What if instead of just accepting things as they are we began to look for ways to bring relief and 'justice' to a very unjust world? Brainstorm how you might go about even starting to see the world this way. How do we really begin to wrestle with the "what if" questions around this topic of social justice? How might the smallest of changes begin to create what could become a river of righteousness and justice?