

The Biblical Foundations of Justice

This resource includes the following:

- **Handout One:** Summary on the the biblical foundations of justice (p. 2-3)
- **Handout Two:** The Biblical Foundation of Justice Chart (p. 4)
- **Handout Three:** Two types of Covenants found in the Old Testament (p. 5)
- **Scripture Activity:** Covenants in Scripture (p. 6)
- **Writing Activity:** Promises Kept, Promises Broken (p. 7)
- **Scripture Activity:** Prophets in Scripture (p. 8)
- **Scripture Activity:** Jesus and Discipleship in Scripture (p. 9)
- **Answer Key & Bibliography** (p. 10)

How to Use This Resource:

This resource is designed to lay the groundwork for understanding the biblical foundations of justice. It is meant to provide an overview in broad strokes so that a proper framework is understood for the ongoing struggle for justice. Grounding an understanding of our own call to discipleship within an understanding of biblical justice is essential for understanding God’s ongoing revelation.

Handout One: Summary

This handout summarizes the core understanding of biblical justice. It lays the groundwork and provides a framework for fostering a deeper appreciation of the distinctiveness of biblical justice.

Handout Two: Chart

This handout presents a visual summary for tracing the development of a biblical understanding of justice through the Old Testament and New Testament.

Handout Three: Covenants

This handout presents an overview of the two major types of covenants in scripture listing distinctive elements of each. It can be used for reference when completing the Scripture activity to determine which type of covenant is evident in the passages provided.

Writing Activity: Promises Kept, Promises Broken

This activity engages personal experience and reflection on the nature of promises as a way into looking at the connection to the concept and content of covenants.

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

-World Synod of Bishops, *Justitia in Mundo*, 1971, #6

Scripture Activities

These activities engage Scripture as a way of illustrating the ideas and concepts presented and invite reflection on the biblical nature and distinctiveness of justice.

Answer Key & Bibliography

An answer key is provided for the Scripture activities and a bibliography is provided with recommended resources for further study and reflection.



The Biblical Foundations of Justice

The starting point for understanding the call to be people of justice in the world today must find its grounding and source first in Scripture. The biblical understanding of justice is distinct and unique from other forms of justice such as the Greek notion of general justice, the Thomistic understanding of the virtue of justice, or modern-day understanding of legal justice. The biblical understanding of justice must be untangled from other connotations of justice in order to understand and appreciate its significance, richness, and call as the basis of our own discipleship.

The foundation and root of justice originate in God's love as revealed in scripture and must be understood in the context of this love. In the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, God's *word* brings all things into being. The heavens and the earth, light and darkness, water and dry land, plants and all living creatures are created by God's life-giving word. Within the context of this community, God creates man and woman in God's own image. God proclaims each creative act as "good."

The original unity of all creation is a paradise, a garden of Eden, until the man and the woman desire power and knowledge, to be like God. This desire creates the division that inaugurates the separation between God and humans which has been named "original sin." Scripture scholar John Donahue states, "Sin is overstepping the limits of the human condition by aspiring to divine power. It can take place through action (the woman) or through complicity (the man). Their desire to be like God sadly separates them from God."¹

Donahue goes on to observe,

After the "fall" the narrative relates the trial and the punishment (Gn 3:8-24). The expected punishment of Gn 3:3 ("you shall die") does not occur. Instead, the harmony of their earlier status is destroyed. Desire for human autonomy leads to alienation and breakdown of community with nature and between man and woman. It is important to note that the subordinate position of women (Gn 3:16), which reflects the de facto situation of women in ancient society, is not something that was to be part of the original blessing of creation, but arises from human sinfulness. Alienation between the earth and humans (Gn 3:17-10) is likewise a result of sin. While the "work" of cultivating and caring for the earth is intrinsic to the human condition prior to sin, "toil" is its consequence.²

The separation, however is not the end of God's relationship, nor does it bring death, but God's desire to be in relationship with human beings is repeatedly evident in the way God hears and responds to the cry of those who are oppressed.

"The foundation and root of justice originate in God's love as revealed in scripture..."

¹ Donahue, John, *What Does the Lord Require?* St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2003. p. 15.



In the Hebrew Scriptures we read over and over again of God's efforts to form a people free enough to love God with undivided hearts. Through a relationship mediated by a leader and formalized through a covenant God seeks to restore all division. Through covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David, among others, God extends love and calls for justice.

The covenant arrangement reveals the elements necessary for a people to be "blessed" by God. The covenant requires a communal commitment to fidelity to God, a willingness to abide by the formal stipulations set forth (i.e. the Ten Commandments), a care and concern for those on the margins - particularly the widow, the orphan, the alien, in order to live and foster right relationships with God and neighbor.

Faithfulness to God and the just treatment of the poor are at the heart of understanding biblical justice. Failure to care for the poor is a failure to be faithful to God. Again, Donahue notes,

*The core of Israel's faith is equated with the doing of justice...The doing of justice is not the application of religious faith, but its substance. Without it, God remains unknown.*⁴

In other words, to truly know God and to love God, one must bring justice to life by attending to the needs of the

poor and marginalized. Love of God is possible only through the love and just treatment of one's neighbor. Without such a connection, God remains unknown. This is why the Synod of Bishops could declare that "*justice is a constitutive element of preaching the gospel.*"

Turning to the New Testament, God's mediation through the prophets of old gives way to the direct intervention of God through the Incarnation. In a radical and definitive way, the Word of God becomes flesh, taking on

human form in Jesus. Jesus reveals God's justice in the flesh as "the new and everlasting covenant."

Jesus proclaims the reign of God and emphasizes a new and essential unity in the commands, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all your mind...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Mt 22:37-39). Jesus reveals the vision of the Kingdom of God through his teachings, parables, and miracles, a kingdom realized only

through the quality of love and justice lived out in the context of community, through loving one's enemies and through the care and treatment of the marginalized. Jesus calls us to a discipleship of love and justice in action.

*Failure to care
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Characteristics of Biblical Justice:³

1. Biblical justice does not admit of a strict philosophical definition, but in the texts themselves is often linked with qualities such as "mercy," "steadfast love," and "fidelity." The traditional contrast between obligations in charity and obligations in justice is foreign to the Bible.

2. Biblical justice is fundamentally "making things right," not simply recognizing or defining *individual rights*. It is concerned with the "right relation" of human beings to God and to each other, and to the earth.

3. Biblical justice is not "blind," nor totally impartial. It is partial to those most affected by evil and oppression - symbolized in the Old Testament by four groups of widows, orphans, the poor, and strangers in the land, and embodied in the New Testament by Jesus' mission to those on the social and religious margins of society.

² Donahue, John, *What Does the Lord Require?* p. 15.

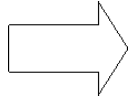
³ Ibid, p. 28.

⁴ John R. Donahue, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," in *The Faith that Does Justice*. New York: Paulist Press, 1977. p. 76



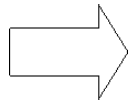
Biblical Foundations of Justice

Justice is revealed in scripture as **God's nature and action**



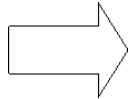
In the Old Testament God is revealed to us as the liberator of the oppressed and the defender of the poor, demanding from people faith and justice towards one's neighbor. It is only in the observance of the duties of justice that God is truly recognized as the liberator of the oppressed.¹

Justice is symbolized and measured by fidelity to the **Covenant**



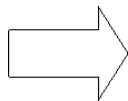
Biblical faith in general, and prophetic faith especially, insist that fidelity to the covenant joins obedience to God with reverence and concern for the neighbor. The biblical terms which best summarize this double dimension of Israel's faith are *sedaqah*, justice (also translated as righteousness), and *mishpat* (right judgment or justice embodied in a concrete act or deed).²

Prophets rise up to call the people to return to God and to remember the demands of justice



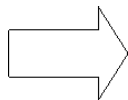
When the people turn away from the living God to serve idols and no longer heed the commands of the covenant, God sends prophets to recall his saving deeds and to summon them to return to the one who betrothed them "in right and in justice, in love and in mercy" (Hos 2:21). The substance of prophetic faith is proclaimed by Micah: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mi 6:8).³

Jesus is God's love incarnate and God's justice enacted in the flesh as the "new and everlasting covenant"



By his action and teaching Christ united in an indivisible way the relationship of people to God and the relationship of people to each other. Christ lived his life in the world as a total giving of himself to God for the salvation and liberation of people. In his preaching he proclaimed the fatherhood of God towards all people and the intervention of God's justice on behalf of the needy and the oppressed (Lk 6: 21-23). In this way he identified himself with his "least ones," as he stated: "As you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40).⁴

Justice is the hallmark of **our discipleship**. Justice is demanded of those who are baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.



According to the Christian message our relationship to our neighbor is bound up with our relationship to God; our response to the love of God, saving us through Christ, is shown to be effective in his love and service of people. Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbor. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every person is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a sibling of Christ, the Christian finds in every person God himself and God's absolute demand for justice and love.⁵

¹ World Synod of Bishops, *Justicia in Mundo*, 1971, #30.

² USCCB, *Economic Justice for All*, 1987, #37.

³ USCCB, *Economic Justice for All*, 1987, #37.

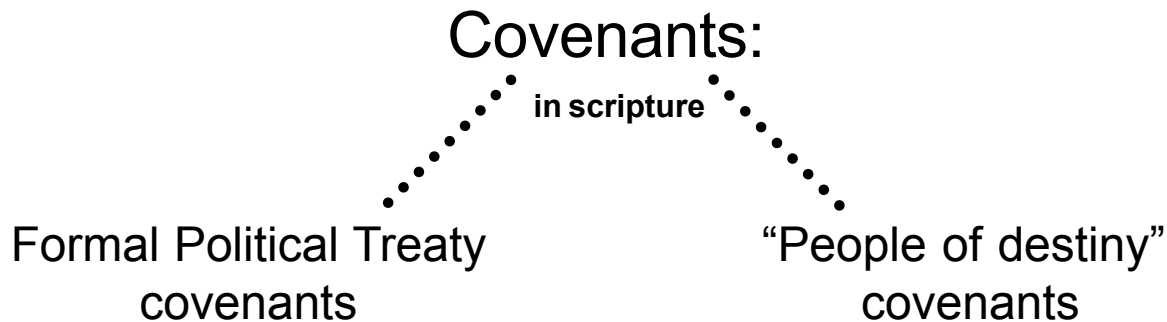
⁴ World Synod of Bishops, *Justicia in Mundo*, 1971, #31.

⁵ World Synod of Bishops, *Justicia in Mundo*, 1971, #34.

Major Types of Covenants in Scripture

Two types of covenants are predominatnly found in Scripture. The first type, formal political treaties, were made between political rulers and king and were legalistic. They became the foundation for modern-type treaties today. The second type, people of destiny covenants, however were between God and the people. Through the “people of destiny” covenants, God desired to form a people who were faithful to God alone, who acted justly and who were in right relationship with God and their neighbor. People of Destinsy covenants were one way that God mediated the call for justice in the Old Testament.

Covenant: a formal agreement or treaty between two parties where each party commits to specific obligation.¹ Fidelity to the Covenant is equated with fidelity to God. A covenant sealed an agreement between parties. It was lasting and extended to future generations.



Characteristics include:

- a pre-amble,
- an historical prologue,
- stated obligations, blessings,
- some stated symbol of the commitment.
- when broken, must be renewed.

Characteristics include:

- they express God’s unchangeable choice of an individual who will bear the destiny of the people.
- this form of covenant cannot be broken.
- it contains distinctive understandings of law and justice
- it reveals a God who wishes people to live in a community combining worship and obedience to God with care for one’s neighbor.
- God remains faithful even when the people break the covenant.
- The purpose of the covenant is a close relationship with God where conversion and a change of heart are possible.

¹ Achtemeier, Paul J. “Covenant,” Harper’s Bible Dictionary. New York: Harper & Row, 1985, p. 190.

Covenants: Promises Kept, Promises Broken

Directions: *Using the Bible, look up the following passages and answer the questions below.*

1. What did God promise Noah? (Gen 9:9-17)
2. What did God promise Abraham? (Gen 12:2-3; 15, 17)
3. What did God promise David? (2 Sam 7; Ps 132; Is 55:3-5)
4. What did God promise Israel through Moses? (Ex 19: 5-6)
5. What famous details of the covenant do you find here? (Ex 20:1-17)
6. What do you notice about the terms and rewards of the covenant? (Deut 15:5-11)
7. What happens when the Israelites obey and disobey? (Deut 28:15-65)
Which of the consequences do you personally think is the worst? Why?
8. What happens if the Israelites ask forgiveness for their failings? (Deut 30:1-3)
9. What is the greatest requirement for living in a covenant relationship with God? (Deut 6:5)
10. What is God's message to the Israelites through the covenant? (Deut 30:15-20)

Writing Activity: Promises Kept, Promises Broken

Directions: Read over the questions and take time to think about some of the more significant promises in your life. Write your responses in the space provided. Be prepared to discuss.

1. Describe a time when a significant promise involving you was kept. (Either you made a promise to someone else, or they made one to you.) What was the nature of the promise? What were your feelings when the promise was kept?
2. Describe a time when a significant promise involving you was broken. What was the nature of the promise? What were your feelings when the promise was broken? How did you react?
3. What observations can you make about the similarities and differences between your feelings and reactions in response to questions 1 and 2?
4. Have you ever made a serious bargain with God? Describe the terms and conditions of your bargain. What happened when your expectations were met or unmet?
5. What connections can you draw between your experience of promise making and keeping with the experience of the Israelites in the keeping or breaking of their covenants with God?

Scripture Activity: Prophet Worksheet

The Prophets speak to the conscience of the people to remind them of the requirements of the covenant. A sign of fidelity to God is evident by the presence and quality of justice in the land.

Directions: Read the following passages and listen to the voices of these Prophets. In the space provided summarize what these prophets are saying about being in right relationship with God and neighbor. What are the demands of justice?

The Prophet Amos

Amos 5:14-15

The Prophet Jeremiah

Jeremiah 7:3-7

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The Prophet Zechariah

Zechariah 7:7-10

The Prophet Ezekiel

Ezekiel 18: 21-22

Ezekiel 34:25-31

The Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah 1:10-20

Isaiah 58:1-14

The Prophet Micah

Micah 6:8

Scripture Activity: Jesus & Discipleship

Focus Questions:

In the New Testament, how does Jesus connect and draw on the understanding of God's justice as seen in the Old Testament? What new and unique teachings does Jesus reveal? What does discipleship demand of us if we are to be true followers of Christ?

Directions: Read the following passages below and identify what Jesus' teachings reveal about justice in connection to the vision of the kingdom of God. What is new and unique? What is Jesus revealing about our own call to be people of love and justice?

Mt 5:3-12 _____

Mt 5:17-20 _____

Mt 5:43-48 _____

Mt 25:31-46 _____

Mk 7:9-13 _____

Mk 10:42-44 _____

Mk 12:28-34 _____

Lk 4: 18-19 _____

Lk 10: 29-37 _____

Lk 22:19-20 _____

Jn 13:34-35 _____

Jn 14:6-7, 12-17 _____

Jn 15:12-18 _____

Answer Key

Covenants Worksheet (p. 5)

- What did God promise Noah? (Gn 9:9-17)
 - A stable universe for the entire human race
 - The covenant was symbolized by the rainbow
- What did God promise Abraham? (Gn 12:2-3; 15, 17)
 - Land (which meant security and prosperity)
 - Abundant offspring, "as numerous as the stars"
 - His descendants would be a blessing for "a host of nations"
- What did God promise David? (2 Sam 7; Ps 132; Is 55:3-5)
 - An everlasting covenant
 - A kingdom that was wide-reaching in its domain
- What did God promise Israel through Moses? (Ex 19: 5-6)
If the people listen and keep the covenant they will be a holy nation
- What famous details do you find here?
The 10 Commandments
- What do you notice about the terms and rewards of the covenant? (Dt 15:5-11) The nation will prosper, God will bless the people, the needy will never be lacking; justice and generosity are connected
- What happens when the Israelites obey and disobey? If they obey they will be blessed and prosperous in countless ways. If they disobey they will be cursed in many ways including exile, plagues, sickness and despoilment.
- What happens if the Israelites ask forgiveness for their failings?
God will take pity on them and change their lot, restoring the blessings.
- What is the greatest requirement for living in a covenant relationship with God? (Deut 6:5) to Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.
- What is God's message? "If you obey the commandments of the Lord...loving him and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the Lord, your God will bless you..."

Prophets Worksheet (p. 7)

Amos 5:14-15: Seek good and not evil, that you may live; And thus may the LORD God of hosts be with you, Just as you have said! Hate evil, love good, And establish justice in the gate!

Zec 7:7-10: "Thus has the LORD of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.'

Ez 34:25-31: "I will make a covenant of peace with them and eliminate harmful beasts from the land so that they may live securely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. "I will make them and the places around My hill a blessing And I will cause showers to come down in their season; they will be showers of blessing..."Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are My people," declares the Lord GOD.

Ez 18:21-22: But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live.

Mi 6:8: God has told you, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Jer 7:3-7: Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place." ... For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds, if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, nor walk after other gods to your own ruin, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

Jer 31:31-34: ... I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."

Is 1:10-20: ... Wash yourselves make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from My sight cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, Reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, Plead for the widow....

Is 58:1-14: ... "Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him;..."

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