

# Justice P4

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## Justice Q+R

Podcast Date: December 20, 2017

(65.07)

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# Justice Q+R

Jon: Okay, justice. Here we go.

Tim: We talked about the meaning of these words specifically in the Old Testament...

Jon: Justice and righteousness.

Tim: ... Yeah, Mishpat and tzedakah - and how for the family of Abraham and story of Israel they were called to a really unique kind of life as a people. Both in the video and in our conversations, we're trying to say these Hebrew words in the context of ancient Israel's life, their covenant with God, that justice specifically meant addressing the social inequities in their corporate life of ancient Israel between the privileged and the powerful and the vulnerable. The quartet.

Jon: The quartets and the vulnerable.

Tim: Mainly, that is the vast majority of the context in which these words occur. There you go. That's just that. The implications of that are huge. They're really broad. And what it means to look to those text as a source of wisdom and guidance for God's people today. Then also we talked about how the theme was fulfilled in the story of Jesus and how the family of Jesus - the New Covenant family of God's people - was also called to that same heritage, but Jesus style.

Jon: Jesus style?

Tim: Jesus style of justice, which is it's the same trajectory.

Jon: It's not different then from Abraham style justice.

Tim: It's not different, but it actually ramps it up because the level to which Jesus didn't use his privilege and status for his own self-advantage, disadvantaged himself for the sake of the vulnerable, namely, mortal screwed human, that sets a new benchmark for what the covenant family of God views justice, and so on. It's a different vision. It doesn't quite fit into any of our modern categories.

Jon: Of justice?

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Tim: Yeah, that's right. The tricky thing we try to address this was that in especially modern Western settings, there have some kind of more democratic republic political structure is the Christianity where this Jewish Christian heritage has been co-opted into the modern categories. I tried to use that guide Michael Sandel - his book "Justice: Rights and Wrongs."

I'm not a political history expert by any means so, any responses we have about anything modern and political related to justice, just take it with a grain of salt.

Jon: We're here in our corner of the world and we see what we see.

Tim: That's right. So happy to offer our thoughts, but more we were just and to draw attention to this. The core theme in the biblical vision of these words and ideas is the way that people who are vulnerable, which is different types of people in different societies, the way they ought to be cared for, and how to care for them is called justice in the Bible. That was the main thing we hope people would walk away with.

Jon: Cool. This first question comes from Jenn.

Jenn: Hey, guys. I'm Jenn in Grass Valley, California. My question has to do with how Jesus's death works to satisfy God's justice. From your discussion, I can see how it brings about mishpat for the oppressed and for the needy, but so often, the cross is discussed in terms of substitutionary atonement, and I have a harder time seeing how that works.

Thinking in legal terms, if I murdered somebody and was allowed to go free because an innocent person volunteered to take my punishment for me, nobody would call that justice. So why does that model work for God? Thanks for all you do.

Jon: Cool. That's a great question.

Tim: Oh, man, it's a really great question. Really perceptive. This is actually where the topic of the video, justice overlaps with conversations about God's justice, specifically how the Apostle Paul talks about, how he talks about Jesus dying for our sins or on our behalf and what are called debates about the meaning of atonement and so on.

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Jon: Right. What she's asking the question about atonement, which is—

Tim: How does Jesus's death cover or deal with human evil and sinfulness? There's actually quite a number of different ways the apostles work that out with imagery and metaphors in the New Testament, but one of the standard ones is using legal language of God's a judge, humans are guilty.

Jon: That's the typical one that I think I was taught growing up in the church. That was the metaphor kind of drilled down is the legal metaphor of "God the judge" and "the son taking the place of my guilt." That is perceptive, the way that Jenn framed it is, if you really step back and think about that, it is kind of weird. It doesn't feel just. It feels really generous, but it doesn't seem necessarily just.

Tim: I want to do a theme video on the cross, where we'll cover all of the different angles. I use this metaphor a lot for different things, but the cross in the New Testament is a lot like a diamond with many, many facets.

There are many different types of images that the apostles use to explain it to explain what ultimately is not completely ever explained, as if you can explain something like the assassination of a Jewish prophet as God's solution to human evil.

Jon: It's not like some mathematic formula that you can just show, "here's the proof and now we all understand it." Which actually it's good to say that out loud because I think that's my assumption is that it should be explainable at that very basic level. There needs to be this inherent logic, this divine logic.

Tim: Why does the cross work?

Jon: Why does cross work? Yeah.

Tim: It's like a math problem. You put together all the passages in the New Testament that talk about the cross, which you might think, "Oh, there's an infinite number." But there's not. It's a big number, but it's not infinite. You can actually go find out what they all are and start to put together a picture.

Jon: Is that what the video on "the cross" will be?

Tim: Yeah. Because what you'll notice is patterns. There are patterns of imagery. There's about half a dozen core repeated patterns all across the New

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Testament that apostles used to talk about the cross. One of them is a legal set of images.

Here's the problem just to deal with this specific question that Jenn raised. I agree with you. That's weird use of the word "justice" that an innocent person suffers the punishment of a guilty person. That seems to be some other form of substitution, but it's weird to apply the word "justice" to that.

Jon: Justice is when people are held accountable for things, but that's retributive justice. And then there's restorative justice, which is, let's make sure that everyone is taken care of in an equal way, let's make sure that people that are marginalized have a step up, let's restore some equality that always eventually...

It's human nature to create inequality. And that's what our video on justice was showing that human nature is we kind of just take advantage when we can. Sometimes willingly and knowingly and sometimes just passively, but this is human nature. There needs to be some counteractive force to that which is restorative justice.

Tim: That's right. It's easier to see how the cross fits into a restorative justice or at least makes more intuitive sense. This is the challenge and this actually gets into the heart of a whole series of important and complicated conversations about if and how the cross satisfies God's justice. That was the language that Jenn used in her question. Even that word "satisfy," there's a whole history of that word in these conversations.

Here's a short sketch of what I think the problem is in our conversations about this. As usual, what we've tended to do is read Paul's letters in isolation from the rest of the Bible and what's very easily as we hear that language of justification of God showing his justice.

There's a key passage in Romans chapter 3 that talks about God displaying his righteousness or demonstrating His righteousness, which is a key New Testament word. It's kind of a synonym for God's justice. The Gods satisfied...

Jon: Really, it's a synonym for justice?

Tim: Mm hmm.

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Jon: I mean, I know we talked about this, but still kind of sinking in. Righteousness, to me it's so loaded with just personal morality. That's all it means. When you say, just it's all I hear in my head thinking around personal morality.

Tim: That's right. In tzedakah, biblical righteousness is doing right by someone. Right relationship.

Jon: The end is a personal morality that makes my relationship to others right.

Tim: Correct.

Jon: Which means that there's a just relationship.

Tim: It assumes that in this particular relationship that you and I happen to be in, there is a right way to behave towards you, and justice is doing right by that.

Jon: So whenever I read righteousness, that word, I should think of it as a synonym for justice?

Tim: Well, our English word "justice" is hard put to its place because we immediately think in terms of legal courtroom stuff. Righteousness is a fine word—

Jon: What would be the word that you would use that like justice and righteousness...? It seems like it's all about relationships.

Tim: That's right. These words are invitations into reflecting on the biblical story. So what does it mean to say that God demonstrated right relationship? With whom? How is the cross a demonstration of God giving...?

[crosstalk 00:11:18]

Jon: Well, okay. Let me step back. Here's the way I would always hear that verse. The cross being God's righteousness is that...this is interesting because righteousness for people is a personal morality; righteousness for God is His perfection.

Tim: It's the standard of His perfection.

Jon: His standard, yeah. And so because He's perfect, He can't be around and tolerate imperfection. And so when God's righteousness appears, what has to

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be dealt with is our imperfection. It's kind of like using it in two different ways. Like, my righteousness is my—

Tim: Here's my humble problem with that, because I was first introduced to Christian belief and these words the same way too. It's usually the case with me, I'm a broken record. The problem is when I actually started to read the Bible, and I realized like, "Oh, I have the story in my head of God as the just judge who can't tolerate evil. Someone has to be punished. Either humans get punished or, lucky for us, Jesus gets punished in our place. And that's God's righteousness or God's justice."

The problem is, that story actually doesn't mesh very well with what Paul's saying in the whole letter to the Romans, and that it doesn't help us understand what's going on in the storyline of the whole Bible with God and Israel leading up to Jesus.

Here's just a short sketch. I would say, that is an abstracted story that the Western tradition has imposed upon Paul and it just doesn't help us understand Paul's understanding of the cross. When Paul uses these words "righteousness," he's thinking Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah. The storyline "God made a good world, humans ruined it," God would be fully within his rights to pull retributive justice. That's what the flood story is all about.

Jon: So far we're tracking with the old paradigm in my mind.

Tim: Yeah, totally. But then on chapter 12 of Genesis, God makes a covenant promise. Actually, all the way back on page 8, after the flood, God makes a covenant promise and says, "Listen, I know humans are only evil all the time. They're really screwed up. Here's my response. I'm never going to do anything like the flood again."

The flood story becomes this really important theological truth about God's character that He could and would be warranted to just bail on humanity, let us destroy ourselves, but he promises that he won't. Why? Genesis 8—

Jon: But He knows.

Tim: Because they're evil.

Jon: That's not a good reason to not do it.

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Tim: Exactly. It's remarkable.

Jon: There's no logic there.

Tim: Because humans are evil, I'm never going to bring cataclysm again. So if God's not going to destroy humans, for their evil, what's he going to do? Genesis 12, "I'm going to set in motion a plan to bless them. I'm going to single out one family from among the nation's family of Abraham and I'm going to set in motion a story that's going to be long and complicated to bless them, restore the creation blessing of page 1."

The moment that God does that, the logic of these words, "righteousness" and "justice," take on a meaning that specific to this story. And when we impose Western courtroom notions onto it, we distort the thing.

Now, all of a sudden, God's in a position where it would be unrighteous for Him to destroy all of humanity, because of His promise. But at the same time, He is just and He has to deal with the horror of human evil in some way.

Jon: You're saying God created this own paradox for Himself?

Tim: Attention. Yeah, God puts Himself into a place of tension in relationship to humans.

Jon: He did it to Himself.

Tim: He did it to Himself. And He does it to Himself again through Israel on Mount Sinai. I'm so proud of that moment in our Exodus Part 2 video where we talked about the golden calf talk about that moment where Moses is crouch by the rock.

I'm so happy I wanted to find language for this for a long time and the video pressed me to do that. That God, he's angry at the idolatry of Israel and He would be—

Jon: The pretty blatant idolatry.

Tim: Totally. He just said—

Jon: They just had their marriage ceremony, what's the next thing?



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Tim: They said their vows, "I won't worship idols," and what do they do on the altar? God's first response is, "I'm angry. I want to pull another flood." But then, Moses says, "Remember Your promise to Abraham?" And God says, "Oh, that's right." And so He relents from that.

Jon: That's a story of God wrestling with the paradox that He created?

Tim: That's right. But here it's specific to the story of Israel. You could say, "In one sense, was God righteous to be angry and want to bail on the relationship? Is that right?" Yeah, that's a legitimate response. But in the context of this story with this God, that would be actually unrighteous. He would not be doing right by His promises and that relationship with Israel because He would be breaking His promise to Abraham. That's what Paul has in mind here.

In Romans chapter 3, when Paul thinks about the story of Jesus, he's thinking about a God who said, "I'm not going to destroy humanity - that would be breaking the promise to Abraham, but I do have to deal with their evil in some way. Their evil has unleashed death." And so God's justice is to fulfill both of those at the same time. And that's Paul's point in Romans chapter 3, is he's demonstrating his righteousness doing right by His promises to Abraham.

"In the forbearance of God," this is Romans 3:25 "in the forbearance of God, he passed over sins previously committed." He's been putting up with human evil since early Genesis.

Jon: His flood trigger finger's getting a little itchy.

Tim: He passed over human sins for a long time in order to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, namely, that he is both dealing with human evil and also fulfilling His promise to provide blessing to the nation's so that, Paul goes on, "He could both be just - He could be righteous and the just a fire. The one who declares righteous those who have faith in Jesus."

Jenn, you're right. The biblical story doesn't all fit into modern categories of our courtroom. However, some courtroom language can kind of help us to get the idea.

Jon: Sure. It's a way to look at the diamond.

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Tim: Yeah. But the moment we force the story into "God's the judge," "humanity's guilty," "Jesus takes the place of the guilty," we're not honoring the terms of the story.

Jon: You know what's interesting is the courtroom analogy, what's kind of tricky about it is the judge is just kind of appear in that system. The judge is just another one of the citizens who's his role is to administer justice.

Tim: That's right. That's different than God's role in the story.

Jon: That's different than God's role because the judge can't just decide like, "You know what? What's right, just for me is to make sure that this civilization succeeds no matter how evil it gets." A judge can't say that. Supreme Court Judge cannot say that in America. What's interesting is like a more accurate metaphor, perhaps, is when Jesus gave the vineyard owner.

Tim: Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Jon: There's a lot of his parables about the owner of the land. But there's one in particular where he has the workers come at different times of the day and he pays them all the same and they get irritated. And the point of that is his grace and letting other people in to the family and stuff like that, it seems like. That's a whole other conversation.

But the metaphor of him being a vineyard owner, he can decide, "It's going to be the right thing for me to do because I own all of this. I'm the owner."

Tim: "Because I have a responsibility to it. I have to do right by the land."

Jon: "Do right by the land, which I own." That's the biblical paradigm of God created this. He is the one who ultimately owns everything.

Tim: And it's good. He's committed to taking our creation towards the purpose that He has for it. And humans are a part of that. The problem with biblical story is that humans have become the obstacle in the way of creation becoming what it's supposed to be.

And the solution isn't to get rid of humans. It's fixed humans by becoming one of them, and to take the consequences of the hell we've created here into himself. It's just that's the biblical form of God being just, i.e., doing right by his promises.

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Jon: It's the twisted backward logic of God's grace. Right there in the flood story, it's so perfect. Like, "I know, man's hearts could be evil all the time so I am never going to destroy you." Like what? It's an interesting thing about that if we put the way of Jesus in the same terms of like, "I know you're going to hurt me, but I'm always going to seek the good of our relationship." Or "I know that there's inequality in the city, but I'm always going to fight for equality. I know that it's not going to be good for me, I think people will take advantage of me, but that's okay. I'm going to do it anyways."

Tim: Because I'm doing right by the one who did right by me. Who lived and died and was raised for me when I was just a participant in the corrupt human system. And so what's the right response? What do we say? I want to draw this to a clear response.

I agree with you, Jenn. The way that you framed your question doesn't correspond to our English use of the word justice. I would say that just exposes the problem is that we're importing categories of justice into the biblical story that just aren't native to the story itself.

If I want to know what these words mean, in the Bible, I have to let the biblical story and the biblical authors shape what these words mean, which will be different than what they mean for us in our day. And then the question is, who adjust? Who has to do the adjustment?

Jon: The Bible.

Tim: Do I change my understanding of justice to fit the unique biblical vision? That's at least what I would recommend if I want to be a follower of Jesus.

Jon: Great. Thanks, Jenn. This next question is from Corey.

Corey: Hi, guys. This is Corey Miller from West Lafayette, Indiana. I teach ethics and philosophy at Indiana University. My question pertains to the characterization of mishpat as the problems of the poor and the downtrodden ought to become my or our problem. In particular, have we failed to distinguish between owning that problem as an application for the church versus the state? Thanks.

Jon: Thanks. Corey. Heavy hitter.

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Tim: Yeah, it's a great question.

Jon: From professor of logic.

Tim: That's right. I'm already intimidated. But, Corey, it's wonderful. It's interesting that this came up in conversation with friends and other people about the video. Maybe either we weren't clear on this point or because we didn't address who is it that's called to call out and address social inequities in terms of mishpat. We didn't talk about who should do that.

Jon: We did. We talked about people who received Christ righteousness.

Tim: That's true. That's right. But we didn't talk about the church's relationship to the state and how those issues work out.

Jon: How would we put that in a five-minute video?

Tim: That's exactly right. What I noticed in patterns of conversation and people asking me about this was that whatever people's existing view of the church's relationship to the state, they just tended to do assume that was the view we were affirming in the video. Which means that people took away really different messages.

Jon: I've been thinking about this in terms of the different political spectrum. We're Americans, we're in the American thing. Apologies. But we have this political divide going on with, how do you govern in a way that makes the most prosperous country and takes care of the most amount of people? I think, if you ask the politician on either side, they would want that. The question becomes, how do you do that?

Tim: What kinds of policies? What values and philosophies? Undergirding what policies?

Jon: Sometimes I'm suspicious of whether or not you actually frame the question of going, "Hey, can we all agree that the main point of our politics as Christians is to take care of the vulnerable?" That's the main point. Now, we might disagree on how but let's begin with the premise that we all agree that that's the end goal.

I think that would be a bit of a come to Jesus moment for many people including myself. But I don't think that's really what's humming in the

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background in my head as the main goal and comes to politics. There are many other things and self-protection or opportunities. All these other things aren't necessarily bad at all. But to say that the main point of our politics as Christians should be to make sure that the vulnerabilities are taken care of. First of all, would you agree with that statement?

Tim: Oh, man. Well, hold on. I feel like we're not—

Jon: We went too far?

Tim: Well, Corey's question is, have we failed to distinguish between who it is that's supposed to be owning the problem of injustice?

Jon: I think, first of all, before you even ask that question, you have to ask, are we all on the same page? Is the church on the same page as to what that even means?

Tim: To me, that's the point we're trying to make in the video is that if you look at these biblical words, mishpat, and tzedakah, the vast majority of their usage and application is the Hebrew words. There are for ancient Israel. This is actually part of problem is, ancient Israel was both a covenant with people...

Jon: Their religion was their politics.

Tim: ...and they were an actual kingdom so that their covenant terms with God's structured their society or at least were supposed to. What we were describing, in most of the video actually, was how these words work in the Hebrew Bible, which will automatically be both covenantal religious and communal or political. That is their meaning in the Hebrew Bible.

Corey is saying, "Did we fail to distinguish between the church in the state? In the Old Testament, the covenantal people, they are the state. And that's the meaning of these words. The rub comes when as the Hebrew Bible is already pointing towards, the ideal shape of God's covenant people and the family of Abraham is not just the ethnic people of Israel.

Isaiah, Jose, Joel, Zachariah, many biblical prophets, the whole story is going towards a multi-ethnic family of Abraham - the new covenant people. And so that family is going to have a different relationship to the state than Israel did, that's what you see being worked out in the New Testament.

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In that sense, yes, I think the vision of justice that followers of Jesus are to foster, which is carrying on this tradition from Israel, that the default institution that followers of Jesus should be thinking about when they think about justice should not be the state.

In my reading of the New Testament, rather, it's the followers of Jesus as a contrast community in whatever culture or state that those people happen to be found, and that they foster this alternate story, this alternate way of life that pays particular attention to the vulnerable. How can you read the stories of Jesus and not see that was part of his main deal was good news for the poor?

There aren't going to be cultures and times where followers of Jesus happened to live in a society where they can advocate for that value set in the public square. What's happened, especially in Europe and America, is now we're in centuries into a culture that has gone through that and is now on its way to something else. The post-Christian whatever.

Now it's an even more awkward situation where the language we use is still shaped by the Christian tradition, but it doesn't mean what it means anymore.

Jon: What language do you mean?

Tim: There's still language of public discourse that's justice oriented in America. Again, that's where we live. Any language about rights, human rights that assumes a biblical worldview, but most people who use that word don't have a biblical worldview anymore. So it creates this awkward scenario. There you go.

We didn't go into this in the video just because it was too much cover.

Jon: I mean, we should advocate that the state's responsibility should also be for the vulnerable as well.

Tim: I think that's a part of the church's role of prophetic critique. This is where the church takes on the role of an Amos or a Mica, or a Daniel, where's it's speaking to those who are in authority, reminding them that they're under God's authority. And under God's authority, the people who matter is

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everybody, but particularly the vulnerable. That's what Amos and Mica and Daniel we're doing in their different contexts.

However, for most of the history of the early church for those early centuries, no Christians were in a position to influence Roman policy. What they did was just fully foster alternative communities and invented things like hospitals and social safety webs for widows and orphans and this kind of thing. They created the institutions. But that depends on your context.

Many Christians live in some form of a democratic state where they actually are able to advocate for their values set for the common good. In that case, I think there's a sense of obligation to speak out for that but to not mistake the state for the church. And that the church is the primary means by which the covenant family lives out the biblical vision of justice. I mean, this is all theoretical.

Jon: I want to create some tangible wisdom out of this in a way. It's like if you were to try to boil this down to insights or precepts of like, when do you engage the state, and when do you stop, and you just do it in spite of the state and how do you decide what's the most effective? That's not a simple question.

Tim: It's not a simple question. It seems to me it'll depend on your neighborhood, your city, your county, your state - that's an Americanized version - and then your country. I think it just depends.

Jon: Your providence for community folks.

Tim: This is where I want to defer to other people who were more well-read and more thoughtful about the issues in our time and in our context because I'm just going to sound ignorant on whatever. But we live in Portland, Oregon. A few generations ago within the city of Portland, there were racially discriminatory housing practices.

Jon: You weren't allowed to move...Is that what you are talking about?

Tim: You weren't allowed to get loans or purchase homes in super neighborhoods based on your ethnicity.

Jon: Not too long ago.

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Tim: Yeah. Like fully within the last century with my grandparents lived experience. Then a city like Portland, even though those practices - I don't even know what day those policies were changed - but even once those policies were changed, the culture of Portland did not change.

The culture of Portland, the urban cores still today is one of the whitest, least diverse urban cores in the country. There are a number of church communities here in Portland who take that really seriously. What they've done to foster it and address that issue is just to really pursue multi-ethnic leadership teams and to really promote racial reconciliation and partnership as a main priority, because that is one of the major injustices that lay in Portland's past. And so the church should be at the vanguard of that.

Should the church also advocate that same kind of multi-ethnic representation? Should it be happening in our public offices for the city? Totally, to the degree that people can influence that. That's what's awesome. They should do that, but they shouldn't mistake that for the calling of the church to address that particular wound in Portland's history. There's a practical example. I don't know.

Jon: I think too grand and I think that what's great is what you're saying is, you're bringing it back down to earth of like, what's going on in your neighbor? Start there. Don't try to like, "I want to think about how to fix entire economic social systems."

Tim: Sure, sure. It's both more complex because it's mega, but it's easier because it's distant. It doesn't actually require me to do anything tomorrow, with the people—

Jon: And look, my neighbor in the eyes. It's doesn't require that either.

Tim: I feel the same way. I know that there's a whole complex series of debates about Christians and voting for example and responsibility to vote, responsibility to not vote. People get very passionate about these debates. But I also noticed for myself, and I think a whole layer of maybe people of my generation. I'm right on the border of Gen X and Gen Y, and for me, to my experience of voting, the culture of voting that I was brought up in was, this is my primary way of making my contribution.

Jon: It's a way [SP].



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Tim: It's a way. It's important but it doesn't divan very much on me. I read a voter's pamphlet and I've signed a piece of paper and somehow I'm involved in the public life of my city. That doesn't make any sense. That sure doesn't seem to be what Jesus has in mind when he said, "Love your neighbor."

Jon: Right now, here in America, there's a lot of talk about, let the voters decide and that we do stress a lot the importance of voting. But you're right, that's such a small way to engage.

Tim: I shouldn't let the experience of voting abdicate my responsibility to my community, and the very tangible things with the people that are in proximity to me.

Jon: It's interesting when you get into politics, and I'm not really that into politics, but I've been so much more interested in it in the last year, but it seems like, first you take your own voting seriously, and then the next step is to take other people's voting seriously by going and canvassing and going door to door. It's just kind of that way of like, how do you rally more and more people to get the votes because that's how you get the right people on office that you want on office?

But take that versus just who in your neighborhood needs help and what can you do to help that person. They're just two different strategies.

Tim: Or what changes have taken place in my part of the city so that policies that made sense 30 years ago about who has the access to this or that actually are causing problems now, because they don't account for this whole new population that exists.

Jon: Now, you're talking about policies, it's all back to votes again, and signatures and that kind of stuff.

Tim: Exactly, that's what I'm saying. They're never divorced from each other, at least in a society where people can influence the policies. But that's a responsibility the people who live in whatever, democratic, republican. Many humans live in states where they can't do jack to influence the shape of their society. So the calling of the church in that kind of setting is super different - will totally different. That's way more like the situation Paul was in or Peter.

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I have found people who have grown up in those types of cultures are able to track with the New Testaments vision on these topics way more intuitively than modern Westerners. Isn't that interesting?

Jon: It is interesting. Great. This next question is from Logan.

Logan: There seems to be this divide amongst Christians on who is oppressed and who isn't. For example, I've heard second Thessalonians 3:10 used as a case against helping the homeless. How do we as a collective body in the spirit determine who is oppressed and who isn't and in the same way, stand up against those who refuse to see the oppressed, but do that in love?

Jon: Cool. Thanks, Logan. We don't know where you're from Logan, but thank you.

Tim: Wherever you are, that's a good question. I'd like to give this more thought. For me, it's always about another stack of books and more time to think about something.

Jon: Think about shoe later?

Tim: That's right. I'm totally think for a shoe later. My first thought is to go towards the main model that we have of the just covenant community with ancient Israel. What is it that determines the vulnerable in ancient Israel?

Jon: The prophets?

Tim: Well, it wasn't just religion. I was socio-economic. It was a land-owning based farming tribal network.

Jon: Which I don't live in one of those.

Tim: Yeah, totally. But in that environment - we talked about this in the podcast - the primary people who become vulnerable, or people who don't participate in the ownership of land or who aren't connected to families who own land. Then you get the quartet of the vulnerable.

Women, specifically widows, who are vulnerable to be taken advantage of by other male community members or family members when their landowning husband dies, even though women could hold it seems based off some stories in book of Numbers 27:36 that women could hold ownership of land, it was patriarchal society, men are screwed up. People are screwed up.

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Jon: But men are stronger...

Tim: In that kind of society, widows are extremely vulnerable, and obviously orphans, immigrants and so on. The logic seems to be people whose participation in what we consider the good life is uniquely vulnerable. That's how you identify the quartet of the vulnerable.

When you look in the New Testament, it's very different socio-economic setting. Most the letters of the apostles are in the urban house churches in larger Roman city, urban centers, which are way more like modern Western cities of people who super dislocated, people are mobile.

Jon: You have more niche vocations. You're not just a farmer.

Tim: The main difference is that over half of the population were slaves - born debt slaves of different varieties there. But they are property of another. The main aspiration of over half the population is to purchase your freedom. That's good life.

Jon: And then one day purchase your own slave.

Tim: Yeah, to be able to own your own slaves, to have your own estate, business and so on. That creates a whole set of dynamics. What do you see? Who are the vulnerable in the New Testament? Women, slaves, children, who are precisely the people that Paul particularly goes after making sure that they have full participation and are cared for and nurtured in the early church community.

Jon: That's the whole story in the Acts where—

Tim: The case for the widow?

Tim: The care for the widows. That's the first thing that came up where it was like, "Man, this community is rocking, but windows are not being taken care of. Let's fix that."

Tim: That's a good example, Acts chapter 6. A system didn't exist so they organized their own system. I think that's it. It's depending on the community where I live, because of the way things are structured, who is it that through no fault of their own, they're just happened to born into some different socio-economic position. And that is going to set them up to be...and this is

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where the debates come in. How free is America? How upwardly mobile are things really?

Jon: Everyone has bootstraps, and everyone can...

[crosstalk 00:43:46]

Tim: That's right. People have very different views and opinions about that, but there are no two ways about it. I think about this all the time, personally. I grew up in Portland as skateboard punk, almost failed out of high school, you know what I'm saying? My dad was a graphic designer sign painter working out of the shop in his garage.

I was the first person in my whole extended family to finish college, and somehow I've been able to ride this wave of education. I was able to get grants or scholarships, work part-time jobs. So I mean, I worked.

But at the same time, my road has also been a pretty easy one. I have pretty easy access to resources. And it's just a hard fact.

There are many people who are born into situations where their family environment won't set them up with that kind of opportunity. I mean, there are so many factors. It's just a simple fact. So the question is, should followers of Jesus be particularly aware of people who are in those situations and to help them in the name of Jesus? Again, this is the family of Jesus doing the Jesus thing open up new opportunities to the good to flourishing as an image of God that they wouldn't otherwise have?

In that sense, that's going to differ from community to community. I've been talking a long time now.

Jon: Well, it is complicated because the list of variables of what can disadvantage you in life is long and nuanced. How do you prioritize those and how do you assess those?

Logan, this isn't really necessarily what you're getting at. Is there a litmus test of saying, "This guy on the left or this person on the left, disadvantaged, on the right, no? So let's take care of the people in the left." There's just so many variables, how would you begin to do that?

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It's tough because the homeless population in Portland, the number one reason that people live on the street in Portland is because of opioid addictions.

Tim: The second being mental illness.

Jon: So you just look at those, and is that a vulnerability issue? When you're prescribed opioids by your doctor, and then you get addicted to them and then you start doing heroin because it's cheaper and more accessible, you weren't doing that because you're vulnerable? Maybe you're doing that because you're vulnerable? I don't know.

Tim: How can you create formulas for these things though? That's what's so difficult. One person, but they, but they live in a family environment that rallies around them.

Jon: And they get through it.

Tim: Now, the person, they just weren't born into to that kind of family, it will be infinitely more difficult for them to kick their habit. That's a social structural thing. But you also can't legislate healthy family, but you can create policies that can shape the environment for healthy families to be more likely to flourish. It's a very complex debate.

Jon: What was the 1 Thessalonians? Is that about "everyone should work"?

Tim: Yeah. I'm with you, Logan. That's just pulling a verse out of context and using it as a weapon in my humble opinion. There are a group of people in Thessalonians house churches who, by policy definition of work, weren't actually working.

There are two possibilities. He doesn't ever say why they're not working. Either one, it's they think that Jesus' return is so close and they've nailed the date. Because that's a big theme in those letters. Another letter, he says they don't work but they are busybodies, which is on this motif that in may...It's the same in any city.

Again, half of the population is slaves. It's people who could work the system and become personal assistant to wealthy estate owners by essentially

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becoming their assistance, but for sketchy stuff or kind of milking the system. It's this weird form of work because what you do is—

Jon: It's not actually helping anyone.

Tim: That's right. You're actually contributing. All you're doing is helping this person.

Jon: You're a parasite.

Tim: You're kind of a parasite. That's right. What you do is personal assistants can be completely legit form of work. I'm not saying that. I'm saying, in this particular system, especially—

Jon: What would be an example?

Tim: The one we used actually in the video because it was extremely common was ritual orgy parties at the local temples was the normal part of life, especially for Roman males. "Friday nights, what do you do?" "My friend's throwing a sacrifice at his party, lots of wine. Who's hiring? The women who will provide —

Jon: My personal assistant to do that.

Tim: "Oh, my assistant will do that." That's the kind of thing.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: So these people would get involved in this layer of the Roman economy that was really sketchy, but it was you can make a living at it. Some people think Paul's aiming at that and saying, "There are some jobs that you just shouldn't do as a Christian. It's not actually work."

Anyway, I agree with you that when you read the Bible out of context and take verses as little independent slogans, you can turn the Bible into a weapon against anybody.

Jon: Seems like one of the biggest fears is that if you reach out to someone who's vulnerable and try to help them, they could take advantage of your generosity. It seems like a driving fear.

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Tim: You're saying that's a theme you hear in conversations?

Jon: Themes in conversations, but even in my own heart. Like, why don't I give \$1 to a guy on the street? I don't think he's going to use it responsibly. It's kind of this interesting thing where it's like because if someone is using something you've done for them and taking advantage of you for it, they're not really being vulnerable anymore. They're making you vulnerable in a way.

So it becomes very this disjointed flustering thing where it's like, "Well, I'm trying to help vulnerable, but it's not helping and it's actually just making my life harder." I think that's one big apprehension that a lot of people have and I think that's kind of an impulse behind pulling versus like that out of context and saying, "Let's just make it really clear. If someone's not going to work, then we don't help them."

Tim: That's right. I guess maybe the same reason that a homeless shelter would be like, "You can join the program, but if you join the program, you need to contribute and take a job here at the mission and that kind of thing."

Jon: Right. There is some wisdom there, but then it can also get off the rails really fast because it seems like we need to remember that at the base of all this is a God who let himself being taken advantage of for others.

Tim: Totally.

Jon: That's the example, which is kind of chilling.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. There's a book I found really helpful a number of years ago addressing these issues of how to interpret any given community, see where the social structures tend to create cracks for certain parts of that population to be unattended to or did fall through the cracks, so to speak. So development work. That means some people make their whole careers out of really honing that skill set of how to discern those cracks and address those issues.

There were a handful of guys, Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, who wrote this book called "When Helping Hurts." It came out a number of years ago, but man, it's so insightful. I actually thought about this after the fact when we accurately described a biblical vision of justice as paying a special attention to the vulnerable in a given community.

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It's really important, however, to see that the primary identity of the people that are being identified isn't the vulnerable. That's not their identity. That's their socioeconomic position at this moment in time. What they are is a glorious image of God bearing human beings who are capable of so much.

So for them, it's about this paradigm shift of helping, especially Christian people engaged in community development to have that be very much the mindset. So it's not a helping paradigm, it's an empowering paradigm or creating opportunity. In a given society they'll be—

Jon: Which is a type of helping.

Tim: That's right. It is, but when you conceive of it is helping it creates what they call the Messiah complex. "I'm the helper, they are the vulnerable dependent." And they're just like, "That's just not the biblical story. The biblical story is glorious images of God who because we're screwed up, even without knowing it, create and participate in the social structures disadvantaged some. Whatever.

And so if the state doesn't do it, then the family of Abraham and Jesus creates a community where at least within this community, those people are given unique and new kinds of opportunities and are empowered.

Jon: One of the really disgusting ways that society takes advantage of the vulnerable is predatory loaning stuff.

Tim: Oh, dude. We were talking about this yesterday. I've been reading about it a little bit. I mean, if you're short on cash, you don't have any money in the bank and you need to fix your car to get to work, or you need food, or you need rent paid, all these things, you can go to these places that just charge you a ridiculous amount of interest to get the cash today and then you're just in this cycle.

Then it gets worse from there because now there's this whole industry of people making up fake loans and these people who now have all this money due to other people, it's confusing, it's hard to keep track of, and then they get these phone calls from people making up loans and bullying them and extracting more money. It's crazy.

Tim: And it all operates under legal business policies.



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Jon: Well, sometimes.

Tim: Sometimes. Sometimes it's illegal, but they still can function within our system for long periods of time without getting flagged. It's crazy.

Jon: It's crazy. It just made me think about loans. Isn't there a verse in the Bible about don't loan with interest?

Tim: Yeah. Again, this is good mishpat and tzedakah thing where the Israelites weren't supposed to exact interest from loans. Then the whole Jubilee cycle and then every cycle of years, those long cycle period. That's right. Israelite couldn't charge interest on Israelites, at least. Ideally.

Jon: I was reading the story of these predatory loans and the whole thing and it just got me really just in a dark place. But I started to imagine it has had this daydream of someone taking wealth and saying, "I want to loan this out interest for you to my community and these microloans, and just trust that some people take advantage of mean, some people won't."

I was just doing this thought experiment, what would happen in a neighborhood if all those people who need that 200 bucks, 300 bucks, 500 bucks for these things, they knew you could go to this place? I pictured this line of people coming and you just talk to them because you want to know about the situation. And then, "Here's the money. Let me pray for you," and go and that's it. What could that do to a society? I don't know. Maybe it would screw up and nothing would happen.

Tim: I'm sure people have done it. I'm sure people are doing it.

Jon: Are there people who are doing it?

Tim: Yeah. That'd be amazing stories. That's good. That's a good example. That's doesn't fit into the typical categories that people tend to think of which would be people that don't have homes, people who aren't employed. But as people who do have homes, who are employed, they're just strapped. They live check to check.

Tim: Which is a lot of the population.

Tim: It's a huge...the working poor. Just the working poor.

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Jon: You're one thing away from the door unraveling.

Tim: There's a good example. I'm sure - again, this is where—

Jon: Do you know someone doing that? I want to hear. All right, let's wrap this up with Vic.

Vic: Hey, Tim. Hey, Jon. My name is Vic. I love if you could shed some light on what the Bible says about the relationship between justice and power. I'm a chaplain in an addiction recovery program in Baltimore, Maryland. We talked a lot about power and powerlessness in a number of different ways, and we'd love to hear your thoughts on that. Thanks.

Jon: It's interesting because there's so much you can do for someone and then someone has to at some point decides, "I'm worth taking care of myself too." I guess there are some people who they've given up on themselves. They don't think they're able to accomplish things. They don't think they're worthy of good things. This is what I deserve. I can't do any better. There's this just mentality that will keep you in this cycle of self-sabotage almost.

I think it's really interesting that he's a chaplain, and I'm sure he has to deal with that mentality a lot - this kind of self-sabotage mentality.

Tim: Isn't that interesting? The same mindset, but for somebody in a different socio-economic position can drive them towards accomplishment. In other words, a low self-worth can—

Jon: Like, I need to prove myself.

Tim: Yeah. It depends on what opportunities you have. So depending on whatever, just depending on somebody's unique story, that same low self-worth can drive somebody into a really destructive set of patterns. It can also drive somebody into hyper-productive that is also destructive on just themselves emotionally and spiritually.

In that sense, both people need to have their self-worth reshaped by God's love and generosity shown through Jesus. For some, people that means elevating their worth and value and realizing, "I am worth a better kind of life." For others, it's saying, "I need to stop taking myself so seriously, and allow myself to fail."

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Jon: Some people it's, "I have more power than I realize and I do exercise that." Other people need to go, "I have less power than I think I do and I need to humbly just chill out." It totally depends.

Tim: That's right. Self-worth issues manifest themselves in so many different ways. I'm not a psychologist, but I know people are experts on this kind of thing. It's so fascinating to me.

Jon: It is fascinating. What I thought of Vic's question at first about justice and power was going to be about what types of people should take the initiative. But that's a different kind of question. But it is interesting.

The prophets Amos and Mica and Isaiah and never call out to the poor. They always call Israel's rulers and priests - public leaders - to account. Even in the church, when Paul takes the Corinthians to account, what he calls is the Corinthians who have enough money to hire lawyers against each other in 1 Corinthians 6.

Then it's like you guys, or Paul calls Philemon, a slave owner and an estate owner to use his position of influence to benefit one of the slaves and treat him like an equal. Actually, that's a good example where Paul calls Philemon, both to kind of disadvantage himself, but he calls Onesimus the slave to a greater sense of value in the community. Then his past doesn't have to define his future in the community. Both people are empowered but in different ways.

Jon: It seems like the true source of your identity that should be empowering you is this image of God identity of being co-rulers. Like, we're all in this to make a good world and to rule over this on God's behalf. That might mean stepping up and that might mean not holding so much power. It could mean different things for different people.

Tim: That's right. There's never formulas. What the Apostle says is what you get is the Holy Spirit. What you get is a Spirit to show you the way, to bring Jesus teachings to your mind, and to reveal new truth and insight to you about how to apply his teachings to your specific situation. Spirit power, man, it's the new justice.

Jon: And Vic has the Holy Spirit, the new justice. Cool. All right. That's it.

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- Tim: You guys. Thank you for your great question.
- Jon: We're going to do another one of these Q&R on nephesh?
- Tim: Yeah. On the soul being nephesh.
- Jon: Yes. Send those questions in. Still, we're collecting those. This is the end of the year for us. It's the last podcast of the year of 2017.
- Tim: It's been an incredible year.
- Jon: It's been a great year,
- Tim: I've talked to Jon about this multiple times. I'm so surprised at how many people enjoy listening to Jon and I talk about theology.
- Jon: I know.
- Tim: I actually don't understand it. It's interesting to me, but I just automatically assume that what's interesting to me is not interesting to most people.
- Jon: I heard this through a guy last night. I was at playing soccer. He was there and he goes, "Oh, yeah. You're Jon. I listen to your podcast. I'm like, "I'm sorry, man. I mean, your head all the time..."
- Tim: You're like, "I'm trying to get out of my head." Thank you. We're having a wonderful time learning together. These conversations all contribute to videos and projects that we're working on. What a great privilege? Thank you for listening.
- Jon: It's actually really encouraging to me to see all these questions from chaplains and philosophers, people just working this out. You know, we're as together.
- Tim: That's what we're doing. We're working it out too and so are all of you. Thanks for listening, and we're excited for our conversations to come.
- Simon: Hey, my name is Simon and I live in the beautiful city of Vienna, Austria. I love The Bible Projects so much that I actually chose to translate it into German and I'm actually here with my good friend Philip, who's the leader of the German Bible Project.

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Phillip: Hi, my name is Phillip and I came from [foreign language 01:04:14]. I love The Bible Projects because I love to train people in Germany to laugh Jesus Christ.

Simon: We believe the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus. We're a crowdfunded project by people like me. Find free videos, podcasts, study notes, and more at [thebibleproject.com](http://thebibleproject.com).