

# Justice and Poverty: Two Views Contrasted

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The Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics tells us, "Biblical justice means *impartially* rendering to everyone their [sic] *due* in conformity with the standards of God's moral law" (§38, emphases added). While there is a sense in which "justice is partial," for it "requires special attention to the weak members of the community because of their greater vulnerability," the Declaration adds, "Nevertheless, the civil arrangements in rendering justice are not to go beyond what is due to the poor or to the rich (Deuteronomy 1:17; Leviticus 19:15)[.] In this sense justice is ultimately impartial" (§39).

Immediately following the first quotation above, the Declaration offers another view of justice: "Paul uses justice (or righteousness) in its most comprehensive sense as a metaphor to describe God's creative and powerful redemptive love. Christ, solely in grace, brought us, [sic] into God's commonwealth, who were strangers to it and because of sin cut off from it. (Romans 1:17-18; 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:4-22)" (§38). Later, "Justice requires conditions such that each person is able to participate in society in a way compatible with human dignity. Absolute poverty, where people lack even minimal food and housing, basic education, health care, and employment, denies people the basic economic resources necessary for just participation in the community. Corrective action with and on behalf of the poor is a necessary act of justice" (§40).

The triple thesis of this article is that the two views are mutually inconsistent, that the former is Biblical, and that the latter is unbiblical.

## The Views Are Mutually Inconsistent

The first view of justice focuses on impartiality, desert, and conformity with fixed and definable standards. The second focuses on love, inclusion in the community, and meeting people's needs. As complementary values to be expressed by actions both inside and outside the Church, the views are consistent. But as views of *justice*, they are incompatible. Comparison of the criteria that are the focus of the views makes this clear.

The first view calls for impartiality in civil arrangements, exemplified by impartial application of rules to rich and poor alike; the second calls for "conditions such that each person is able to participate in society in a way compatible with human dignity," and it denies that what it calls "absolute poverty" fills those conditions. But if historical reality is that some people live in "absolute poverty" not because others oppress them but because they think and behave in economically unproductive ways, providing "minimal food and housing, basic education, health care, and employment" for "just participation in the community" will require partiality in their favor.

The first view calls for rendering to each what is due, recognizing the principle of desert; the second, for providing particular material and social goods without reference to desert. The first view readily comports with Paul's command that whoever refuses to work must not be permitted to eat (2 Thess. 3:10); the second stumbles at such words. It is tempting to surmise that the second view *assumes* that considerations of desert should temper its otherwise untempered demands. But to do so would ignore the evidence of the text and its history. Not only does this immediate passage mention no conditions on the provision of these economic goods, which cost someone something even if they do not cost their recipients, but other passages also do the same. Thus we read, "God's intention is for people [note: no qualifications] to live, not in isolation, but in society"<sup>1</sup> (§38), and "In affirmation of the dignity of God's creatures, God's justice for them [note: without qualification] requires life, freedom, and sustenance. The divine requirements of justice establish corresponding rights for human beings to whom justice is due. . .

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<sup>1</sup>Scripture places conditions on people's living in society. See, for instance, instructions to "cut off" from the community people who commit various sins or became ceremonially unclean (Ex. 12:15 [cf. v. 19]; 23:23; 30:33, 38; Lev. 7:20-21, 25, 27; Ex. 31:14; Lev. 17:3-4, 9-10, 14; 18:29; 19:8; 20:2-3; 22:24; 23:29; Num. 9:13; 15:30-31; 19:13; 19:20).

. It is a requirement of justice that human beings [note: without qualification] . . . are able to live in society with dignity. Human beings therefore have a claim [note: without qualification] on other human beings for social arrangements that ensure that they have access to the sustenance that makes life in society possible" (§51). Significantly, ¶37, which in the final version says, "We believe it is the responsibility of every society to provide people with the means to live at a level consistent with their standing as persons created in the image of God," omits an important qualification that appeared in an earlier draft: "We believe it is the responsibility of every society to provide people *who cannot work with [sic] no fault of their own* with the means. . . ." That these claims are unqualified, i.e., that no conditions are placed on these rights, indicates that the notion of justice put forth in the second sentence of ¶38, clarified by ¶70 of the first draft of the *Composite Discussion Document*<sup>2</sup> and the essay on which the latter was based,<sup>3</sup> dominates these considerations.

The first view appeals to definable, unchanging standards, God's moral law, to govern how we determine what everyone is due; the second sets forth vague, general, and culturally relative measures of material and social goods as due to everyone without condition. For instance, its definition of "absolute poverty" is both problematically imprecise and historically myopic. What, for instance, is "basic education," and what proportion of people has enjoyed it in any given human society through the millennia? Are we to take "health care" as modified by "minimal" or "basic" or nothing? In any case, what does it include and exclude? Are "minimal" and "basic" to be defined relative to what is common in the late-twentieth-century United States, or the mid-nineteenth-century United States, or medieval Europe, or Israel under Solomon (e.g., 1 Ki. 10:21, 27) or Samaria a century later (2 Ki. 6:24-29), or any of a thousand other societies and economic conditions we might name, ancient and modern? If the standards are defined relative to common conditions in particular geopolitical entities, what happens to the Biblical insistence that justice know no boundaries and play no favorites between citizens and aliens? The reciprocity of commutative justice<sup>4</sup> inherent in the first view disarms the problem of cultural relativism; the second view cannot escape it.

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<sup>2</sup>The *Composite Discussion Document* provided the outlines for discussion during the Oxford Conference. Paragraph 70 of its first draft included the following relevant material:

The meaning of justice . . . must be found in the core of what the Christian faith is. At the centre of the Christian faith there is the affirmation that in Christ we encounter the grace of God. In Christ our alienation from God and to [sic] each other is overcome. The gift of God's love draws us into community. The barriers which divide people have been brought down in Christ (cf. Eph. 2). It is often thought that God's grace needs to be balanced with God's justice as if they are somehow in tension with one another. This is the case wherever Christians speak of God's justice needing to be satisfied before we can speak of love. But Paul says we are loved despite our unrighteousness.

The separation of love and justice is false. . . .

So, what love desires, justice demands. God's grace is not in contrast to God's justice; God's grace is what defines God's justice. And by God's grace what is due to us . . . is to belong. To belong to God, and to one another.

<sup>3</sup>The material was based on (and often repeated word-for-word) J. Philip Wogaman's paper "Toward a Christian Definition of Justice," delivered at the Regional Conference on Economics and Christianity, sponsored by the Oxford Conference on Christian Faith and Economics, at Wheaton College, February 24-25, 1989, and published in *Transformation* 7:2 (April/June 1990), pp. 18-23.

<sup>4</sup>See below on the meaning and application of commutative justice.

### The Biblical Vocabulary of Justice

Several Hebrew and Greek words are prominent in the Biblical material on justice. Because the brevity of this article precludes a thorough word study, we must make do here merely with listing the key words, their meanings,<sup>5</sup> and (in footnotes) some of their more significant instances.

The Hebrew *yāšar*<sup>6</sup> (adj., straight, right, pleasing [to God or man], straightforward, just, upright; n., the right, right things, the upright; abstr., uprightness) and *mišpāt*<sup>7</sup> (n., judgment [the act, place, process, case, or cause; the sentence or decision; execution, or time of judgment]; justice, right, rectitude [of God or man]; ordinance; decision of the judge in a case of law; legal right, privilege, or due] correspond closely with the Greek *kríma*<sup>8</sup> (n., dispute, lawsuit; decision, decree; judging or judgment; judicial verdict; sentence of condemnation; pronouncement of judgment) and *krísis*<sup>9</sup> (n., judging, judgment; judgment against a person; condemnation, or punishment that follows; right, justice, righteousness).

The Hebrew *yāšar*<sup>10</sup> (v., to be smooth, straight, or right; to go straight; be pleasing, agreeable, right; ethically, to be straightforward, upright; to make smooth, straight; to lead straight along, direct; to esteem right, approve) and *šāpat*<sup>11</sup> (v., to judge, govern; act as law-giver, judge, or governor; decide a controversy; to execute judgment by discriminating (between right and wrong, good and bad, true and false,

<sup>5</sup>The brief definitions here are adapted from Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, edd., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Edward Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1907] 1978) for Hebrew words, and from Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup>*Yāšar* occurs in Ex. 15:26; Deut. 6:18; 1 Sam. 12:23; 29:6; 1 Ki. 15:5; 2 Chr. 29:34; Ezra 8:21; Neh. 9:13; Job 1:1; Ps. 7:10; 19:8; 25:8; 33:4; 119:137; 125:4; Prov. 11:3; 14:12; Jer. 31:9; Mic. 3:9. (This and the following lists of uses of the Hebrew and Greek words are illustrative only, not necessarily exhaustive.)

<sup>7</sup>*Mišpāt* occurs in Gen. 18:19, 25; Ex. 21:1; 23:6; Lev. 18:4, 5; 19:15, 35; Num. 27:5; Deut. 1:17; 4:1, 5, 8; 16:18, 19; 17:8-11; 24:17; 1 Sam. 8:3; 2 Sam. 8:15; 15:2, 4, 6; 1 Ki. 8:4, 49; 10:9; Ps. 1:5; 9:4, 7, 16; 72:1-2; 99:4; 103:6; Prov. 21:3; Eccl. 5:8; Is. 1:21; 28:17, 26; 56:1; 59:8-15; Ezk. 45:9; Amos 5:7, 15, 24; Mic. 6:8; 7:9.

<sup>8</sup>*Kríma* occurs in Mt. 7:2; 23:14; Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47; 23:40; 24:20; Jn. 9:39; Acts 24:25; Rom. 2:2, 3; 3:8; 5:16; 11:33; 13:2; 1 Cor. 6:7; 11:29, 34; Gal. 5:10; 1 Tim. 3:6; 5:12; Heb. 6:2; Jas. 3:1; 1 Pet. 4:17; 2 Pet. 2:3; Jude 1:4; Rev. 17:1; 18:20; 20:4.

<sup>9</sup>*Krísis* occurs in Mt. 5:21, 22; 10:15; 11:22, 24; 12:18, 20, 36, 41, 42; 23:23, 33; Mk. 3:29; 6:11; Lk. 10:14; 11:31, 32, 42; Jn. 3:19; 5:22, 24, 27, 29, 30; 7:24; 8:16; 12:31; 16:8, 11; Acts 8:33; 2 Thess. 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:24; Heb. 9:27; 10:27; Jas. 2:13; 2 Pet. 2:4, 9, 11; 3:7; 1 Jn. 4:17; Jude 1:6, 9, 15; Rev. 14:7; 16:7; 18:10; 19:2.

<sup>10</sup>*Yāšar* occurs in Num. 23:27; 1 Sam. 6:12; 1 Chr. 13:4; Ps. 5:8; 119:128; Prov. 4:25; 11:5; Is. 45:2.

<sup>11</sup>*Šāpat* occurs in Gen. 19:9; Ex. 18:16; Deut. 1:16; 16:18; 25:1; Jdg. 3:10; Ruth 1:1; 1 Sam. 8:20; 24:15; 2 Sam. 18:19, 31; 1 Ki. 3:9; 1 Chr. 16:33; Ps. 7:8; 10:18; 26:1; 43:1; 51:4; 82:3; 96:13; 98:9; Is. 1:17; 11:4; Ezk. 34:20-24; 36:19.

innocent and guilty), vindicating, condemning, or punishing; enter into controversy, plead) correspond closely with the Greek *krínō*<sup>12</sup> (v., to separate or distinguish; to select or prefer; to judge, think, or consider; to look upon so as to assess; to decide, propose, or intend; in law, to judge, decide, hale before a court, condemn, or hand over for punishment; to condemn, administer justice, or punish; to see that justice is done; to pass personal [not legal] judgment, to express an [especially unfavorable] opinion about).

The Hebrew *ṣaddīq*<sup>13</sup> (adj., just, righteous [in government; of God; of judges; of law; in one's cause, right; in conduct and character, ethically; justified and vindicated by God; right, correct, lawful], *sedeq*<sup>14</sup> (n., righteousness; what is right, just, or normal [i.e., consistent with a norm or standard]; righteousness [in government, of rulers, law, Davidic king, Jerusalem as seat of government, God's attribute as sovereign]; justice in a case or cause; rightness in speech; ethical righteousness; righteousness as vindicated, justification in a controversy; deliverance, victory, prosperity), and *ṣēdāqāh*<sup>15</sup> (n., righteousness, in government [of a judge, ruler, king; of law; of Messiah]; righteousness as God's attribute [as sovereign; in government; in administering justice, punishment; vindication of His people]; righteousness in a case or cause; truthfulness; ethical righteousness; righteousness as vindicated [justification, salvation]; righteous acts) correspond closely to the Greek *dikaiosúnē*<sup>16</sup> (n., uprightness, justice, of a judge; moral and religious uprightness, righteousness, whether of persons, motives, or actions; fulfilling divine statutes; righteousness bestowed by God), *dikaiōsis*<sup>17</sup> (n., justification, vindication, acquittal), *dikaiōma*<sup>18</sup> (n.,

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<sup>12</sup>*Krínō* occurs in Mt. 5:40; 7:1, 2; 19:28; Lk. 6:37; 7:43; 12:57; 19:22; 22:30; Jn. 3:17, 18; 5:22, 30; 7:24, 51; 8:15, 16, 26, 50; 12:47, 48; 16:11; 18:31; Acts 3:13; 4:19; 7:7; 13:27, 46; 15:19; 16:4, 15; 17:31; 20:16; 21:25; 23:3, 6; 24:6, 21; 25:9, 10, 10, 25; 26:6, 8; 27:1; Rom. 2:1, 3, 12, 16, 27; 3:4, 6, 7; 14:3-5, 10, 13, 22; 1 Cor. 2:2; 4:5; 5:3, 12, 13; 6:2, 3, 6; 7:37; 10:15, 29; 11:13, 31, 32; 2 Cor. 2:1; 5:14; Col. 2:1, 16; 2 Thess. 2:12; 2 Tim. 4:1; Tit. 3:12; Heb. 10:30; 13:4; Jas. 2:12; 4:11, 12; 1 Pet. 1:17; 2:23; 4:5, 6; Rev. 6:10; 11:18; 16:5; 18:8, 20; 19:2, 11; 20:12, 13.

<sup>13</sup>*Saddīq* occurs in Gen. 6:9; 18:23-26; Deut. 4:8; 16:19; 25:1; Ps. 1:5; 7:9; 34:15, 19, 21; 37:12, 16, 17, 29; 58:10, 11; 72:7; 112:4; 116:5; Prov. 11:8; Is. 26:2; 45:21; 53:11; Ezk. 18:5; 33:12.

<sup>14</sup>*Sedeq* occurs in Lev. 19:15, 36; Deut. 1:16; 16:18, 20; 25:15; Job 8:3; 31:6; Ps. 7:8, 17; 9:8; 18:20; 23:3; 65:5; 72:2; 85:10, 11; 89:14; 119:75; Prov. 1:3; Is. 42:6; Jer. 31:23; Ezk. 45:10; Hos. 2:19; Zeph. 2:3.

<sup>15</sup>*Ṣēdāqāh* occurs in Gen. 15:6; 18:19; Deut. 9:5; 24:13; 33:21; 2 Sam. 8:15; 19:28; Neh. 2:20; Ps. 31:1; 99:4; 106:31; 143:11; Is. 9:7; 28:17; 32:17; Jer. 4:2; 9:24; 22:3, 15; Ezk. 14:14, 20; 18:5, 21.

<sup>16</sup>*Dikaiosúnē* occurs in Mt. 3:15; 5:6, 10, 20; 6:33; 21:32; Lk. 1:75; Jn. 16:8, 10; Acts 10:35; 13:10; 17:31; 24:25; Rom. 1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25, 26; 4:3, 5, 6, 9, 11, 13, 22; 5:17, 21; 6:13, 16, 18-20; 8:10; 9:28, 30, 31; 10:3, 4, 5, 6, 10; 14:17; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 3:9; 5:21; 6:7, 14; 9:9, 10; 11:15; Gal. 2:21; 3:6, 21; 5:5; Eph. 4:24; 5:9; 6:14; Phil. 1:11; 3:6, 9; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22; 3:16; 4:8; Tit. 3:5; Heb. 1:9; 5:13; 7:2; 11:7, 33; 12:11; Jas. 1:20; 2:23; 3:18; 1 Pet. 2:24; 3:14; 2 Pet. 1:1; 2:5, 21; 3:13; 1 Jn. 2:29; 3:7, 10; Rev. 19:11.

<sup>17</sup>*Dikaiōsis* occurs in Rom. 4:25; 5:18.

<sup>18</sup>*Dikaiōma* occurs in Lk. 1:6; Rom. 1:32; 2:26; 5:16, 18; 8:4; Heb. 9:1, 10; Rev. 15:4; 19:8.

regulation, requirement, commandment; righteous deed; justification [once: Rom. 5:16]), *dikē*<sup>19</sup> (n., [just] penalty, punishment), and *dikaios*<sup>20</sup> (adj., [of men] upright, just, righteous [conforming to the laws of God]; [of God in His judgment of men and nations] just, righteous; [of things] right, righteous, innocent; what is obligatory in light of standards of justice).

The Hebrew *sādaq*<sup>21</sup> (v., be just, righteous; have a just cause; be justified in a plea; be just or righteous in character or conduct; do justice by justifying someone or declaring him righteous; save someone or vindicate his cause; make righteous or turn to righteousness) corresponds closely to the Greek *dikaióō*<sup>22</sup> (v., to show or do justice; to justify, vindicate, or treat as just; to be acquitted, pronounced, or treated as righteous, i.e., to be justified; to make free or be set free; to be proved to be right) and *dikaiōs*<sup>23</sup> (adv., justly, in a just manner; uprightly).

### The First View is Biblical

A comprehensive study of these words in their contexts supports the view of justice stated in the first sentence of ¶38 of the Declaration. In the drafting process, I was the primary author of what became that sentence. To make its implications explicit, let me revise it slightly: *The Biblical concept of justice may be summarized as rendering impartially to everyone his due in proper proportions according to the norm of God's moral law.* This definition reveals four main criteria of justice: (a) impartiality, (b) rendering what is due, (c) proportionality, and (d) normativity, i.e., conformity with a norm.

The first criterion of justice, *impartiality*, is fairness, a lack of bias or favoritism, an equal application of all relevant rules to all people in all relevant situations. When Moses commissioned the judges of Israel, he charged them, "*Hear the cases [šāpat, "judge"] between your brethren, and judge [šāpat] righteously [sedeq] between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him. You shall not show partiality in judgment [mišpāt]; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment [mišpāt] is God's*" (Deut. 1:16-17). Just judgment, then, is always impartial (compare Ex. 23:3, 6; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 16:19; Job 13:10; Prov. 18:5; 24:23; 28:21; 1 Tim. 5:21; Jas. 2:1-9; 3:17). God Himself is the chief exemplar of impartiality in judgment (Deut. 10:17; 2 Chron. 19:7; Job 13:8; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Eph. 6:9; Col. 3:25; 1 Pet. 1:17), and He condemns all partiality in judgment or government (Ps. 82:2; Mal. 2:9).

The second criterion of justice is *rendering to each his due*. Paul instructs believers to "render . . . to

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<sup>19</sup>*Dikē* occurs in Acts 25:15; 28:4; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 1:7.

<sup>20</sup>*Dikaios* occurs in Mt. 1:19; 5:45; 9:13; 10:41; 13:17, 43, 49; 20:4, 7; 23:28, 29, 35; 25:37, 46; 27:19, 24; Mk. 2:17; 6:20; Lk. 1:6, 17; 2:25; 5:32; 12:57; 14:14; 15:7; 18:9; 20:20; 23:47, 50; Jn. 3:14; 4:19; 7:24, 52; 10:22; 17:25; 22:14; 24:15; Acts 3:14; 4:19; 7:52; 10:22; 22:14; 24:15; Rom. 1:17; 2:13; 3:10, 26; 5:7, 19; 7:12; Gal. 3:11; Eph. 6:1; Phil. 1:7; 4:8; Col. 4:1; 2 Th. 1:5, 6; 1 Tim. 1:9; 2 Tim. 4:8; Tit. 1:8; Heb. 10:38; 11:4; 12:23; Jas. 5:6, 16; 1 Pet. 3:12, 18; 4:18; 2 Pet. 1:13; 2:7, 8; 1 Jn. 1:9; 2:1, 29; 3:7, 12; Rev. 15:3; 16:5, 7; 19:2; 22:11.

<sup>21</sup>*Sādaq* occurs in Gen. 38:26; 44:16; Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; 2 Sam. 15:4; 1 Ki. 8:32; Job 4:17; 9:2, 20; 11:2; 33:12; Ps. 19:9; 51:4;; 82:3; 143:2; Prov. 17:15; Is. 5:23; 50:8; 43:9, 26; 53:11; Ezk. 16:51, 52; Dan. 8:14; 12:3.

<sup>22</sup>*Dikaióō* occurs in Mt. 11:19; 12:37; Lk. 7:29, 35; 10:29; 16:15; 18:14; Acts 13:39; Rom. 2:13; 3:4, 20, 24, 26, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 6:7; 8:30, 33; 1 Cor. 4:4; 6:11; Gal. 2:16, 17; 3:8, 11, 24; 5:4; 1 Tim. 3:16; Tit. 3:7; Jas. 2:21, 24, 25; Rev. 22:11.

<sup>23</sup>*Dikaiōs* occurs in Lk. 23:41; 1 Cor. 15:34; 1 Th. 2:10; Tit. 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:23.

all their due" (Rom. 13:7), and he puts this instruction in a discussion of justice or judgment (v. 2, "judgment" is *kríma*). Again, God is the chief exemplar: ". . . will He not render to each man according to his deeds?" (Prov. 24:12; cf. Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 1 Cor. 3:8; Gal. 6:7-8). Here the word *render* translates a Hebrew verb meaning to turn back or return, whether physically, as from place to place, or metaphorically, as in turning back to God, or retributively, as in making requital, whether justly (reward for good, punishment for wrong) or unjustly (returning evil for good or good for evil). Similarly, the Greek word translated "render" in Rom. 13:7 means to reward or recompense. *A key concept in justice is that something about the recipient of an act (especially a judgment) merits or warrants the act (or judgment)*. This is reinforced in Rom. 13:7 by Paul's writing that we should render "to all their due." Sometimes what is due is determined by *who someone is*, e.g., governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-14); parents (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20; Deut. 5:16); religious leaders (Heb. 13:17; Acts 23:1-5). Sometimes, however, what is due is determined by *what someone does*, e.g., elders are due *double honor* if they rule well (1 Tim. 5:17); the proud are due punishment (Ps. 94:2); murderers deserve death (Gen. 9:6), and so on. The case laws of Ex. 21—22 detail what is due in various crimes and torts against persons and property, all as matters of justice or judgment: "Now these are the *judgments* [*mišpāt*] which you shall set before them" (Ex. 21:1).

The third criterion of justice, *proportionality*, entails *symmetry between rewards and punishment, on the one hand, and the acts in return for which they are rendered, on the other*. This principle displays itself in Scripture in two ways. First, proportionality distinguishes generally between violations of property and violations of persons, prescribing different kinds and degrees of punishment for the two (Lev. 24:17-21). Second, proportionality distinguishes accidental harm, negligent harm, and intentional harm. For instance, if someone *accidentally* damages or destroys his neighbor's property, justice is served by evening up the loss between the two (Ex. 21:35). But if he might reasonably have foreseen and prevented the accident but did not, and so harms his neighbor *negligently*, he must bear the full loss alone, restoring to his neighbor the full value of what was damaged or destroyed (Ex. 21:36; compare Ex. 22:6). And if he *intentionally* steals or destroys his neighbor's property, he must restore what is taken plus some multiple of it as punishment for his wicked intent (Ex. 22:1). Similarly, *accidental* homicide deserves no punishment, and the accidental manslaughterer must be protected from anyone who would try to wreak vengeance (Deut. 19:4-6; Ex. 21:13); *negligent* homicide deserves death, but the heirs of the deceased (or possibly the judges) may permit a ransom (Ex. 21:29-30); and the *intentional* murderer must be executed without pity (Deut. 19:11-13; Ex. 21:14), no ransom being permitted (Num. 35:31). Corporal punishment short of execution also is to be proportionate to the magnitude of the offense (Deut. 25:1-3), as is all punishment or restitution (Ex. 21:24-27; Lev. 24:19-20). Even hell has degrees of torment proportionate to degrees of wickedness in this life (Lk. 12:42-48).

The fourth criterion of justice, *normativity*, means that what is done is *according to a norm or standard*; it conforms with a rule. In this respect, justice or righteousness is *closely akin to truthfulness and honesty*. Thus, for instance, God commanded Israel, "You shall do no injustice in judgment, in measurement of length, weight, or volume. You shall have honest scales [literally, "scales of *righteousness*"] honest weights, an honest ephah, and an honest hin" (Lev. 19:35-36), meaning that their measures of length, weight, and volume must be just, must accord with an unchanging standard. This has direct application to economic relationships because it means that justice requires absolute honesty in all exchanges. This application appears more clearly in Deut. 25:13-16: "You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a heavy and a light [i.e., for use as counterweights in a scale]. You shall not have in your house differing measures, a large and a small. You shall have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure, that your days may be lengthened in the land which the LORD your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who behave unrighteously, are an abomination to the LORD your God" (cf. Job 31:6; Ezek. 45:10). By using differing weights and measures, buyers and sellers could defraud each other by measuring more or less of something when it was to their benefit to do so, but appearing to measure the same amount all the time. Apparently precisely such unjust trading practices were on God's mind when

He said through Micah that His people must "do justly" (Mic. 6:8), for He went on to say, "Are there yet the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the *short measure* that is an abomination? Shall I count pure those with the *wicked scales*, and with the bag of *deceitful weights*? For her rich men are full of violence, her inhabitants have spoken lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth" (Mic. 6:10-12). Yet another means of deceitful injustice in trading was to dilute the purity of the goods (including gold or silver coin or bullion used as money) offered in trade, a practice God condemned and used as a metaphor for the wickedness of rebellious hearts (Is. 1:21-26; Ezek. 22:17-22).

**Three Types of Relationships, Five Types of Justice**

Justice governs all human relationships, but what it requires and permits differs according to the types of relationships involved. The table below shows the three primary types of relationships, the five types of justice, and what each type requires in the relationships to which it applies.

Three Types of Relationships, Five Types of Justice		
Voluntary Relationships	Involuntary Relationships	Accidental Relationships
<p><i>Commutative Justice:</i> Free-will exchange of value for value in trade among individuals</p>	<p><i>Punitive Justice:</i> Visitation of punishment on one who violates another's rights</p>	<p><i>Remedial Justice:</i> Restoration of persons to proportionately the same relationship they had before an accidental injury of one by another</p>
<p><i>Distributive Justice:</i> The generalization (or distribution) of commutative justice systematically throughout a population by prohibiting, preventing, prosecuting, and punishing violations of commutative justice</p>	<p><i>Vindicative Justice:</i> Acquittal of the innocent charged with a crime; restoration of victims by requiring those who harm them to pay restitution</p>	

*Commutative and Distributive Justice*

In voluntary exchanges, *commutative justice* is the principle that value must be exchanged for value without deception or coercion. The fundamental premise of commutative justice is the eighth commandment: "You shall not steal" (Ex. 20:15). All laws against theft, fraud, or cheating, and laws requiring performance of contracts (oaths, vows, or promises) express this basic law. For instance: "You shall not steal, nor deal falsely, nor lie to one another. . . . You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning" (Lev. 19:11, 13). An implication of commutative justice is that if we desire what another has, we must offer something he prefers in exchange for it, not acquire it by force or fraud, a message implicit in Eph. 4:28: "Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something. . . ." (Paul turns from justice, which requires work rather than theft, to grace when he completes the exhortation, "that he may have something to give to him who has need.") Violations of commutative justice by fraud, theft, or violence bring punitive and vindicative justice (on which see below) into play as correctives.

*Distributive justice* should not be understood as determining the distribution of wealth or power in a population, as it often is, but as having to do with the distribution of justice itself: the universal application of rules without partiality or exception. Biblically rooted distributive justice, contrary to both moral relativism and utilitarianism (or consequentialism), insists that the same rules must apply to all people. Not specific results (who owns what, who has power, and so on) but just processes (impartiality, rendering what is due, proportionality, and conformity to the norm or standard) are required by distributive justice. Thus it is a hallmark of the Rule of Law that the concrete, historical results of particular laws or

regulations in the lives of particular individuals or groups must be unpredictable, because the results must be conditioned on how people respond to laws (which varies from person to person), not on the laws alone. Laws requiring equal justice to all, regardless of their status in society, enunciate this principle.

Fundamental to distributive justice, then, is the distinction between formal laws and substantive rules. As Friedrich Hayek put it,

The difference between the two kinds of rules is the same as that between laying down a Rule of the Road, as in the Highway Code, and ordering people where to go; or, better still, between providing signposts and commanding people which road to take. . . . In fact, that we do *not* know their concrete effect, that we do *not* know what particular ends these rules will further, or which particular people they will assist, that they are merely given the form most likely on the whole to benefit all the people affected by them, is the most important criterion of formal rules in the sense in which we here use this term. . . .

A necessary, and only apparently paradoxical, result of this is that formal equality before the law is in conflict, and in fact incompatible, with any activity of the government deliberately aiming at material or substantive equality of different people, and that any policy aiming directly at a substantive ideal of distributive justice must lead to the destruction of the Rule of Law. To produce the same result for different people, it is necessary to treat them differently.<sup>24</sup>

What Hayek calls *formal law or justice* is what we mean by *distributive justice* here. His term *substantive rules* is related to the idea of positive rights, i.e., rights—not conditioned on the acts of the person having the rights—to the provision or acquisition of particular things (food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, etc.) rather than to just treatment. The principle of positive rights, because it ignores the conditionality entailed by the principle that justice requires rendering what is due, is inconsistent with distributive justice.<sup>25</sup>

Commutative justice is readily obtained by many people for themselves, but *a general system of protection* (distributive justice) is necessary for those who, for various reasons, are especially vulnerable to injustice: "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates" (Deut. 24:14; cf. Lev. 19:13; Deut. 15:7-18; Prov. 14:31; Amos 4:1; Mal. 3:5; 1 Tim. 5:18); "You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child. If you afflict them in any way, and they cry at all to Me, I will surely hear their cry; and My wrath will become hot, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless" (Ex. 22:21-24; cf. Ex. 23:9; Deut. 10:19; 24:17-18; Prov. 23:10, 11; Jer. 7:6-7; Zech. 7:10; Jas. 1:27). (Notice the symmetry between the punishment God threatens and the offense. This illustrates the principle that justice renders to each his due, on which see above.) We must not use the inability of some oppressed people to defend or vindicate themselves as an excuse to subvert the norms of justice.

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<sup>24</sup>Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944), pp. 74-5, 79. The whole of Chapter 6, "Planning and the Rule of Law," is invaluable for understanding the meaning of distributive justice and the Rule of Law.

<sup>25</sup>For a critique of positive rights, see Walter Block, "Private Property, Ethics, and Wealth Creation," in *The Capitalist Spirit: Toward a Religious Ethic of Capitalism*, ed. Peter L. Berger (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1990).



*Punitive and Vindicative Justice*

When someone is forced to suffer a wrong, he is oppressed, i.e., is treated with injustice—a violation of commutative or distributive justice. In response, God calls us to *vindicate* that person, to set things right. The rectifying (vindicating) actions have two persons in view: the perpetrator of the injustice, and the victim. *Punitive justice* relates to the perpetrator and involves visiting on him the *due penalty* for his injustice. *Vindicative* and *retributive justice* relate to the victim and involve judging him right in his complaint (vindicating him) and restoring to him what was lost (procuring retribution [from Latin *re*, "back," and *tribuere*, "to pay"] from the perpetrator). In *crimes against property* (theft, destruction), punitive and retributive justice combine in the criminal's restoring to the victim what was taken or destroyed (retribution or restitution) plus some additional amount (punishment). For instance, in theft: (a) If the criminal voluntarily confesses his crime and makes restitution, he is to repay what he stole plus 20 percent (Lev. 5:14-16; 6:1-5; 22:14; Num. 5:5-8). (b) If the criminal is caught, he is to repay what he stole plus the same value again, i.e., restitution is double (Ex. 22:4, 7). (c) In certain instances and for reasons difficult to determine today, when the thief steals livestock and slaughters or sells it, restitution is fourfold (for a sheep) or fivefold (for an ox) (Ex. 22:1). (d) If a starving man steals food and is caught, restitution must be "sevenfold" (Prov. 6:30-31). This idiomatic Hebrew expression means that the full restitution prescribed by the law—whatever the multiple—must be paid, and the thief's crisis excuses neither his crime nor the imposition of a lesser penalty by a judge. In *crimes against persons*, punitive justice requires the suffering of some loss by the criminal, and retributive (vindicative) justice requires the criminal to bear the costs of the injury—except in murder, in which case the criminal is to bear the same loss as the victim: he is to be executed (see Ex. 21:12-27). It is important to note that the Bible considers false accusation of a crime to be a crime itself. Vindicative justice is done when one falsely accused is declared innocent and his accuser is made to suffer the penalty associated with the alleged crime (Deut. 19:16-19).

*Remedial Justice*

Sometimes people damage others' property by pure accident, meaning that neither ill intent nor negligence is involved. In such cases, Biblical justice requires the one who causes the loss to share the cost equally with the victim (Ex. 21:35). But if negligence is involved (meaning the harm is not purely accidental), the negligent person must bear the whole loss himself (Ex. 21:33-34, 36). Or if the property is rented, its accidental damage is considered covered by the price of the rent (Ex. 22:15b), unless a prior agreement specifies that accidental damage during the renter's possession requires additional payment.

In its punitive, vindicatory, and remedial senses, justice often comes to the special aid of the poor.

*Justice and the Poor*

Scripture forbids partiality either in favor of or against the poor (Ex. 23:3, 6; Lev. 19:15). Nonetheless, the Old Testament also frequently associates help for the poor with justice (Ps. 72:2, 4; 82:3; 140:12; Prov. 29:14; 31:9). Why?

Because the poor are particularly vulnerable to injustice in ways others are not; therefore they more frequently are victims of injustice than are most others. Furthermore, often the many Hebrew words translated "poor" in these contexts emphasize not the material destitution of those involved but their weakness, dependence, or low status in society and hence their being easily oppressed.<sup>26</sup> In other words, it is not simply because these people are materially lacking that Scripture tells us to help them by administering justice on their behalf, i.e., by justifying or vindicating them, but because they are victims of

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<sup>26</sup>Additional discussion of the meaning and usage of the Biblical vocabulary of the poor is beyond the scope of this article, but it is crucial to the understanding of the application of justice to the poor. A very helpful study of the former is Daryl S. Borgquist's *Toward a Biblical Theology of the Poor* (La Mirada, CA: Talbot Theological Seminary, unpublished Master of Theological Studies thesis, 1983).

injustice (e.g., Ps. 72:4; 74:21; 82:3; 109:31; 140:12; Prov. 22:22; 28:3; Eccl. 5:8; Is. 3:14; 10:2; 11:4; Jer. 5:28; Amos 2:6; 5:12). In contrast, we are to exercise charity, or grace, toward them simply because they are materially lacking, whether they deserve help or not (Deut. 15:7-11; Ps. 112:9; Prov. 19:17; 22:9; 28:27; Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 19:8; 2 Cor. 9:6-9.)

Consequently, the Old Testament frequently speaks of the poor in ways similar to how it speaks of other vulnerable people, e.g., widows, orphans, and strangers (see Deut. 10:18). For instance, the ideal king (ultimately the Messiah) "will judge [*dyn*, plead the cause; execute judgment, vindicate, requite; govern] [God's] people with righteousness [*sedeq*], and [His] poor [ *`ānī*, needy, weak, afflicted, humble, but not always materially lacking] with justice [*mišpāt*]. . . . He will bring justice [*šāpat*] to the poor [ *`ānī*] of the people; he will save the children of the needy [ *'ebyōn*, in want, materially lacking], and will break in pieces the oppressor [ *`āšaq*, one who deals deceitfully, defrauds, oppresses, does violence]" (Ps. 72:2, 4); i.e., He will vindicate the poor who are victims of injustice. So frequently are the *materially poor* also the *oppressed or afflicted* that the two Hebrew words denoting these sometimes are used interchangeably, as in the parallelism of Ps. 74:21: "Oh, do not let the oppressed return dishonored; let the afflicted and needy praise Your name." Here the "oppressed" simply *are* the "poor" and "needy." The same idea occurs in Ps. 82:3: "Defend [*šāpat*, judge, vindicate] the poor [*dal*, low, weak, thin, reduced, helpless] and fatherless; do justice [*sādaq*, be or make right, cleanse, clear, do justice or righteousness] to the afflicted [ *`ānī*] and needy [*rāš*, in want, lacking, poor]." While justice, then, is never *partial* to the poor in his case (Ex. 23:3), it recognizes that the poor is often vulnerable to injustice, and so it is particularly apt to come to his aid in vindication, justification, or salvation from those who oppress him (see also Ps. 140:12; Prov. 29:7, 14; 31:9; Ecc. 5:8; Is. 3:14; 10:2; 11:4; 32:7; Jer. 5:28; 22:16; Ezek. 18:17; Amos 5:12).

The key point is that when the Bible speaks of doing *justice* for or to the poor, it does so in light of their having suffered *injustice*. When, in contrast, it speaks of helping the poor simply because they are poor, not because they are oppressed, it speaks in terms of charity or grace.

### The Second View is Unbiblical

The second view of justice in the Oxford Declaration obscures the distinction between justice, on the one hand, and grace (or charity) and love, on the other. This leads to serious misconceptions of both Biblical ethics and the theology of salvation.

The confusion is most apparent in the assertion that Paul used *justice* as "a metaphor to describe God's creative and powerful redemptive love." The declaration cites Rom. 1:17-18; 3:21-26; Eph. 2:4-22 as examples of this usage. A careful examination of these passages, however, indicates that they exemplify nothing of the sort.

In Rom. 1:16-18, Paul writes,

<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in [the gospel] the righteousness [*dikaiośunē*] of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just [*dikaioś*] shall live by faith." <sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness [*adikia*] of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness [*adikia*]. . . .

Aside from the fact that *justice* or *righteousness* is not used metaphorically in this passage, the righteousness of God of which Paul here writes is a righteousness given by God to believers as the ground of their justification. Apart from this *gift* of righteousness, they, like all men, would be unrighteous and so subject to God's wrath (verse 18). Verse 17, then, functions as an explication of verse 16, as John Calvin points out:

This is an explanation and a confirmation of the preceding clause—that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation. For if we seek salvation, that is, life with God, righteousness must be first

sought, by which being reconciled to him, we may, through him being propitious to us, obtain that life which consists only in his favour; for, in order to be loved by God, we must first become righteous, since he regards unrighteousness with hatred. He therefore intimates, that we cannot obtain salvation otherwise than from the gospel, since nowhere else does God reveal to us his righteousness, which alone delivers us from perdition. Now this righteousness, which is the groundwork of our salvation, is revealed in the gospel: hence the gospel is said to be the power of God unto salvation. Thus he reasons from the cause to the effect.

Notice further, how extraordinary and valuable a treasure does God bestow on us through the gospel, even *the communication of his own righteousness*.<sup>27</sup>

This righteousness "cannot here be understood of a divine attribute," writes Charles Hodge, ". . . because it is . . . a righteousness which is by faith, i.e., attained by faith, of which the apostle speaks. Besides, it is elsewhere said to be without law [Rom. 3:21], to be a gift [5:17], not to be our own [10:3], to be from God [Phil. 3:9]."<sup>28</sup> Put simply, verse 17 explains how the gospel mentioned in verse 16 can be "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." It is because the good news is that God gives His righteousness to those who believe, who without that gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:17) would be unrighteous and therefore would suffer His wrath (Rom. 1:18).

In Rom. 3:21-26, Paul writes,

<sup>21</sup>But now the righteousness (*dikaíosúnē*) of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, <sup>22</sup>even the righteousness (*dikaíosúnē*) of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; <sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup>being justified (*dikaioúmenoi*) freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup>whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness (*dikaíosúnē*), because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, <sup>26</sup>to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness (*dikaíosúnē*), that He might be just (*díkaion*) and the justifier (*dikaioúnta*) of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Here again, in addition to *righteousness* or *justice* not being used metaphorically, it clearly is not the inherent righteousness or justice of God that Paul has in mind when he writes of "the righteousness of God

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<sup>27</sup>John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. John Owen, in *Calvin's Commentaries*, twenty-two volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984 rpt.), vol. 19, part 2, pp. 63-64, emphasis added.

<sup>28</sup>Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, [1886] 1977 rpt.), p. 30. For other arguments to the same conclusion, see David Brown, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, in Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, three volumes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976 rpt.), vol. 3, part 2, p. 195; Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of Romans* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, 1958 rpt.), pp. 48-9; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, [1936] 1961 rpt.), pp. 78-80; Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), p. 18 (who cites Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, "The righteousness of God is that righteousness which he imparts in order to make men righteous. Just as that is the Lord's salvation by which he saves us" [11, 18]); H. C. G. Moule, *Studies in Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, [1892] 1977 rpt.), p. 57; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 30-31.

apart from the law" that is "through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe." Rather it is the gift of righteousness (Rom. 5:17) received "through faith" and given "to all . . . who believe." Righteousness as God's character does indeed come into view in verses 25-26, but not as the motive or ground of God's saving sinners through justification, but as the attribute of God that might have been questioned were it not for the *gift* of righteousness granted to believers. God would have been unjust had He simply declared righteous (justified) those who had no righteousness; but the gospel tells us that there is a righteousness given by God, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, that merits the declaration of righteousness for the believer (compare Rom. 5:15-19). This is the same righteousness of which Paul elsewhere writes, ". . . I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, *not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith . . .*" (Phil. 3:8-9).

In Eph. 2:4-22, Paul never uses the words for righteousness or justice. Instead, he writes that "God, who is rich in *mercy*, because of His great *love* with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by *grace* you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show *the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*. For by *grace* you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the *gift* of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (verses 4-10). Not God's justice but His grace is the motive cause of His saving sinners; and Rom. 3:21-26 tells us that the gift of righteousness is the meritorious cause of that salvation, the cause that satisfies the demands of His justice for righteousness in all who will come near to Him.

Paul makes the distinction clear: man's own righteousness (or justice) is "from the law" (Phil. 3:9). Therefore, since all have broken the law, no man is truly righteous in himself (Rom. 3:9-20). If our justification were by the works of the law, it would not be "counted as *grace* but as *debt*" (Rom. 4:4; cf. 3:20-4:3). Paul's choice of words is significant here in light of later usage. Here he argues that whatever is of grace cannot be of debt (*opheilēma*). But later, when he tells us that justice requires our rendering to everyone his *due* (*opheilās*; Rom. 13:7), he uses the same root. We may infer, then, that whatever is of justice is not of grace, and whatever is of grace is not of justice.

This is why it is so dangerous to confuse justice and grace, as occurs in the second view in the Declaration. To say, "Paul uses justice . . . as a metaphor to describe God's . . . redemptive love," and then to attribute redemption to grace (§38, third sentence), is to imply that God's saving sinners was not a gracious gift of His righteousness to them but an act of His justice toward them. It is to imply that somehow sinners were *due* redemption, not that it was granted us as an unmerited gift. The ultimate danger from the confusion appears strongly in the *Composite Discussion Document*, which said (§70),

The meaning of justice . . . must be found in the core of what the Christian faith is. At the centre of the Christian faith there is the affirmation that in Christ we encounter the grace of God. In Christ our alienation from God and to [sic] each other is overcome. The gift of God's love draws us into community. The barriers which divide people have been brought down in Christ (cf. Eph. 2). It is often thought that God's grace needs to be balanced with God's justice as if they are somehow in tension with one another. This is the case wherever Christians speak of God's justice needing to be satisfied before we can speak of love. But Paul says we are loved despite our unrighteousness.

The separation of love and justice is false. . . .

So, what love desires, justice demands. God's grace is not in contrast to God's justice; God's grace is what defines God's justice. And by God's grace what is due to us . . . is to belong. To belong to God, and to one another.

If "by God's grace what is due to us . . . is to . . . belong to God," then the logical implication is that

everyone is due redemption, everyone is due salvation. But Paul's words answer directly: "Now to him who *works*, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt" (Rom. 4:4), and ". . . by *grace* you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, *not of works*, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8-9). Belonging to God is *due* to no one; it is given freely to those whose desert is the opposite: "For the *wages* of sin is death, but the *gift* (*chárisma*, from *cháris*, grace) of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

If "what love desires, justice demands," then is everyone due whatever someone who loves him desires him to have? What if the lover can't provide the thing desired? Whose duty is it to provide it? Who will be charged with injustice if it never is provided? Confusing love or grace with justice leads inexorably to such insoluble conundrums.

Furthermore, although all of God's attributes are internally consistent, they have different effects outwardly on His creatures. As we have seen, the effect of God's grace toward sinners contrasts with that of God's justice. From God's justice flows the condemnation of the unrighteous, i.e., of *all*, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. From God's grace flows the justification of some of the unrighteous, namely, those who are made righteous, i.e., those to whom God gives the gift of righteousness so that God "might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

And this is precisely why *grace exceeds justice as a remedy of the troubles of the poor*. Although some of the poor's troubles are caused by injustice, others are justly deserved, for the poor are not exempt from sin just because they are poor. Indeed, that any sinner enjoys any benefit is a sign of God's grace to him, since all deserve nothing but His wrath (Rom. 1:18). Doing justice for the poor, then, might relieve them of some of their troubles; it might go a long way toward ameliorating their circumstances. But just as lost sinners need not just judgment but gracious pardon from God ("Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin" [Rom. 4:7-8].), so the poor need, as a remedy for their own failings, not justice but charity (*cháris*, grace).

It is troubling, therefore, to see some writers disparage charity in contrast with justice when discussing the needs of the poor. That happens, for instance, when Ronald Sider writes of the sabbatical year debt relief, ". . . it is crucial to note that Scripture prescribes justice rather than *mere* charity."<sup>29</sup> *MERE* charity? *MERE* grace? Does this sound like Paul's exultations that God "predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, *to the praise of the glory of His grace*" (Eph. 1:5-6), that "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin, according to *the riches of His grace*" (Eph. 1:7), that "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, *that in the ages to come He might show THE EXCEEDING RICHES OF HIS GRACE* in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:4-7)?

Properly understood, charity—i.e., grace—should never be thought a less appropriate response to people's needs than justice. Where the needy suffer because they have been unjustly treated, they need justice and, if that is not attainable, charity. Where they suffer because they have harmed themselves, or by mere historical circumstances (really, divine providence), they need charity. Paul's high view of grace cannot be reconciled with a disparaging view of charity to the poor. The same glorious grace that, in God, motivated the atonement should, in us, underlie our understanding and motivate our exercise of economic charity. By drawing this connection between the grace of atonement and the grace of economic charity we do not demean the former but elevate the latter (charity) by associating the two, just as Paul does when

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<sup>29</sup>Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: A Biblical Study*, 2d ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 83; 3d ed. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), p. 68, emphasis added. See also in 3d ed., p. 71, ". . . God wills justice, not mere charity."

he makes the grace of Christ in atonement the paradigm for the grace of the Corinthians in giving to the needy saints of Jerusalem: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

### Conclusion

Let there be no misunderstanding. Refusing to equate justice with grace or love does not mean denying the necessity of obedience to God's commands by those who profess faith in Christ Jesus, and God's commands *include the command to exercise grace to the poor*. Practical righteousness or justice, therefore, requires *graciously* serving the poor—and not only the poor but all people with all kinds of needs. Believers, individually and corporately, owe God this gracious service to the needy as a matter of obedience.

But if the benefits of the gracious service to the needy that God commands are made a matter of our justice *to the needy* rather than of our justice *to God*, then grace becomes law, and law never saves. Then the needy—and those who merely profess to be needy—may claim the benefits of grace as their due by justice, appealing to the state for their enforcement, since God has ordained the state to enforce justice. That way lies the socialist welfare state—the enforcement of "charitable" aid by the coercive power of the state. Not only does Biblical ethics, as I have argued above, stand against such a view of justice and the state, but also history tells us that the socialist welfare state succeeds only in multiplying the poor and their needs, not in lifting them out of poverty—a fact to which the Oxford Declaration, reinforced by Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, gives ample testimony.<sup>30</sup>

The proper alternative, however, is not the opposite extreme, individualism. Both extremes of the dialectic are contrary to Scripture. The proper alternative is obedience to the commands of God. When He commands justice, we do justice; when He commands grace, we exercise grace. When He ordains the state to enforce justice, not charity, the state must stay within its God-given boundaries, just as when He commands private persons, both individually and corporately, to exercise charity, not (punitive) justice (Rom. 12:19), they must stay within their God-given boundaries. For the state to overstep its bounds and become a vigilante for charity is as wrong as for private persons to overstep their bounds and become vigilantes for (punitive) justice; the one leads ultimately to totalitarian socialism, the other to mob law. My quarrel is *not* with real caretaking but with an all too human methodology that must fail to serve the poor.

Indeed, the poor do need justice; *everyone* needs justice from his fellow man. It is the solemn obligation of everyone to do justice to everyone else, and particularly of governing authorities to enforce justice throughout the community (Rom. 13:1-4). But just as sinners need grace, so the poor need charity.

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<sup>30</sup>John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, May 1, 1991 (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1991), p. 61. For detailed argument of the counterproductive (and unintended) consequences of the welfare state, see E. Calvin Beisner, *Prosperity and Poverty: The Compassionate Use of Resources in a World of Scarcity* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), pp. 183-7; Clarence Carson, *The War on the Poor* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969); and Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). The Oxford Declaration and *Centesimus Annus* address the historical failure of socialism chiefly in what are now formerly communist countries. The other three references address the failure of the welfare state to help the poor in democratic capitalist countries.