Expository Description of Justice in the Kingdom of God

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**Introduction**

Pull up BBC, NPR, CNN or any other news source. Try even Facebook or Instagram. Within minutes of reading and watching it will become apparent that someone somewhere is being mistreated and taken advantage of. People around the world are being marginalized and oppressed. Most people will question how this can happen and why it is still happening in the twenty-first century. After thousands of years shouldn’t we have a world that is full of peace and equality? People also want to know when justice will be brought to those that are doing the oppressing. Ask a Christian what they think of all the injustice and the name of Jesus will come in at some time. Christ followers will give an account of how Jesus is bringing justice. But non-Christians don’t always see evidence of Jesus making change and they want to know why? Jesus came two-thousand years ago. Is he still relevant? And before that, the Jews followed a God that Jesus claimed to be. Yet it’s been since the beginning of human existence that injustice has been prevalent. How then can Jesus be of relevance to justice today? But Jesus, the God of Christianity, called for an establishment of a Kingdom filled with justice of his creation that when outworked to its full will see injustice abolished.

**The Kingdom of God**

**A Story of a Kingdom**

Stories of justice have resonated across time. Even fictional authors have even written characters into their novels that represent kingdoms of justice. For example, in J.R.R. Tolkien’s trilogy of the *Lord of the Rings*, a character by the name of Aragorn is introduced. As his character unfolds, it the reader learns he comes from humble teachings but destined for greatness. He lived his youth, brought up by elves, learning the ways of simplicity and justice. As the story of the fellowship continues, Aragorn lives a life as a Ranger of the North where he serves to protect people not of his own that are constantly under threat of being marginalized. In Tolkien’s narrative, there are hints of Aragorn’s true identity and what he is meant to become but it is not until the ultimate evil is defeated that his true identity come to fruition. Prior to the defeat of Sauron, Aragorn announces the kingdom that he will establish. Aragorn lived his life to establish a kingdom full of justice, but not in the way anyone expected him to. On the establishment of his kingdom, it was said to be marked by great harmony and prosperity within Gondor and Arnor (Tolkien, 1955). Throughout history, authors continue to have written stories and made films of men and women that come to establish an order where the weak and oppressed are no longer enslaved or marginalized. They do this to express and depict and world where humanity is in need of a savior and justice is needed to make change. It’s a theme that humanity constantly desires.

A similar narrative, to which it is said J. R. R. Tolkien has based themes on, is the story of God and his establishment of a Kingdom. After generations and generation of the Israelites failing to meet expectations, Jesus comes on to the scene. He comes into the world with humble beginnings yet from a linage of greatness. There are prophetic hints of who Jesus will be. Though Jesus’ miracles he demonstrates his heart to look after the poor and oppressed. Just like Aragorn, Jesus starts to announce the Kingdom that he will establish. Within the narrative of the Bible, Jesus defeats evil and fully establishes his Kingdom. Since the story of Jesus’ kingdom real and present, unlike J. R. R. Tolkien’s kingdom of middle earth, one could evaluate and see the effects of justice in the kingdom here on earth, both past and present.

**A Kingdom of God**

The Bible unveils a Kingdom of God that has been established so that the King can have a relation with his creation. The Bible is a collection of books by different authors that reveal the purpose and the story of the Kingdom which illustrates how people of earth have treated, should treat, and will be treated. Similar to literary authors of art, like Tolkien, the authors of the Bible attempt to enlighten the world of what a Kingdom of God looks like. The bible comes to culmination in the New Testament when Jesus gave the best explanations of the Kingdom captured in writing by the authors of the gospels. It would make sense that the King of the Kingdom would say exactly what his Kingdom should look like. But even those words are twisted with mystery and cloud. “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined”, “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field”, “ The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed”, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field” are all examples of the mysterious kingdom that Jesus announced (Matthew 12:25; 13:24; 13:31; 13:44). To fully understand the mystery of the Kingdom and the role of justice in it one must evaluate the whole text of the Bible.

From the Old Testament creation story to the apocalypse literature of Revelation the Bible holds plenty of kingdom themes. Within the Kingdom, there are many goals and desires that the king wants to accomplish. One of those is justice. The theme of justice is constant throughout the Bible. It will become evident in the following evaluation of the Kingdom that Jesus established a Kingdom where justice is at the forefront of what he is doing.

**Justice in the Kingdom**

**What is Justice?**

**The real meaning of justice.** The denotation of the word “justice” does not correctly represent the connotation of justice found in the bible when describing the current kingdom of God. Oxford dictionary defines justice as **“**the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims or the assignment of merited rewards or punishments” and also “the administration of law; *especially* the establishment or determination of rights according to the rules of law or equity” ("Justice," 1989). According to Oxford’s definition, there is an aspect justice that implies a judgment being sentenced resulting in an outcome. In postmodern western thinking, it results in a connotation that there are rules and regulation that must be followed. Breaking of the rules results in punishment, a judgment of the broken law. This is not to say there won’t be judgement for biblical laws broken or upheld, or to say that God has not set guidelines for his followers to adhere to. It is written that “God ‘will repay each person according to what they have done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (Romans 2:6-7 New International Version [NIV]). What is understood in a modern western connotation of justice is a need for rules to set limits on proper living.

Our postmodern thinking and connotation of justice result in on time delivery of products. As a culture of instant gratification, people like to see outcome as soon as possible. In most cases this is thought about in terms of personal gain. When buying a car, the car is instantly available. When texting someone, they need to respond right away. Online companies strive to deliver product as soon as possible. This concept also applies to social change as well. When money is given to a non-profit, results should be instant as if donations result in instant product. If a demonstration is held for equal rights, the law needs to change to see reprimand for those that were in conflict. This however is unrealistic. The definition the Bible gives is much different.

# The Bible’s definition of justice includes a lifestyle of outworking justice. It is not about obligations. It is not about seeing recompense of action. The Bible describes justice as an attitude of life. As it will become apparent, Jesus wants his followers and his Kingdom to demonstrate justice by taking care of people that not in positions to do so themselves. It is justice that seeks to keep people from being oppressed and marginalized.

**The measuring tape of justice.** Justice includes a predefined standard of equality. Notice in the oxford definition there is a mention of “equity”. This is to say that there must be an established and decided standard of equality so that when deciding if something is just or not there is a ruler to measure it to. Humanity will constantly debate what the measuring tape of justice looks like, but clearly there must be one. In the case of the Kingdom of God, the bible will be the measuring tape of justice. Be aware that even within the bible itself interpretation of the standard can be quite board.

Jesus Wants His Followers And His Kingdom To Demonstrate Justice By Taking Care Of People That Are Not In Positions To Do So Themselves

The standard of equality which is set by God is not one that should be obtained by minimal requirement. The standard is a guideline for right living. It is not meant to be a check in the box. The Nation of Israel fell into this trap and it became a religious practice that allowed them to self-gloat about how well they were doing justice. It is also how modern day culture has allowed us to have rules to follow and failing to follow rules is punishment. It will become evident that the measuring tape by which God uses is meant to set direction for just living. Now to investigate what that justice looks like.

**Background to Kingdom Justice**

**Justice in the Old Testament**

**Injustice enters the world.** In the first few chapters of Genesis, the story of creation is told which includes how justice should be outworked. In Genesis 1:26-28, God created humanity to rule over the earth. Humanity bears the image of God for “God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they man rule’” (NIV). Such that “For I, the LORD, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing” humanity is then justice focused (Isiah 61:8 NIV). Humanity is to show justice to all, even to the earth itself. However, take careful note that there is nowhere in the narrative that gives permission for humans to rule over each other. Even when God creates diversity in humanity by creating genders he does not give one the right to rule over the other. The separation of genders gives diversity within humanity which partners with itself for “it is not good for the man to be alone. I [God] will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18 NIV). The next step is to figure out how this just relation between God, humanity, and earth will work.

It is not clear in the narrative of creation how this relation is to be out worked, but by reading the rest of the Bible the standard of justice can be extrapolated. One reason for not having it laid out in the creation story is that there was no injustice in the world to give reason for a clarity on justice. All that can be said is that since God is just, humanity is just.

Where then does the injustice come from? It is found in the fall. “We shall find that the Bible again and again speaks of sin in terms of injustice, oppression, and exploitation” (Glasser, 2003, p. 39). When humanity chose themselves over God by eating the fruit, injustice was released into the world. “And I [God] will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the women, and between your offspring and hers” (Genesis 3:15a NIV). From this moment in the Bible on there will be a theme of injustice that is combated with justice. Until the people of the earth can choose God once again, injustice will exist. It is not till the Kingdom of God that is not yet comes will the injustice stop, for that is when all of creation will choose God. Until that coming, God needed a plan to ensure justice was outworked in his Kingdom that is.

**Establishing the law.** When the people of Israel left Egypt, guided by Moses, they found themselves a free people without law. They were a people that had spent the last “four hundred years as strangers in a country not their own and that they were enslaved and mistreated there” (Genesis 15:13 NIV). The new freedom was a chance for God to set the standard by which to live. God took the opportunity to give the law to the people of Israel. “God who delivered Israel had a purpose for her that was to be the means of blessing the whole earth, and this purpose was to be expressed and extended in their keeping of the law” (Dyrness, 1998, p. 62). It is in the establishment of the law that God creates a justice producing lifestyle. The law was more than just a right and wrong with punishments for action. It was a guideline to action on justice.

The law had strict guidelines on how to treat people both inside and outside the nation. As much as these were laws to be obeyed and had consequences for disobedience, they were focused on a standard of appropriate conduct. This would ensure the justice of God lasted the generations. God’s law was on the treatment and relationship of slaves, minorities and outcasts by those over them was a core theme to all his laws. The law created a relation “between slaves and masters [that] was essentially the same as that between family member and the master” (Glasser, 2003, p. 87). This was a much different kind of order then what the Israelites were used to in Egypt as slaves. To the defenseless such as widows, fatherless children, needy, and outcasts “God promised to be their defense and judge of those who oppressed them” (Glasser, 2003, p. 87). The law was in place for the protection of the marginalized.

It Is In The Establishment Of The Law That God Creates A Justice Producing Lifestyle

What is seen in the formation of the law is an appropriate style of living that ensures everyone in the community is looked after. Bellingham identifies five laws from the Old Testament for a just and equal society. In short, the Israelites were to give one-third tithe to the poor, leave some crops for the poor to glean, charge no interest to the poor, cancel debts every seven years, and to give back land every fifty years (Bellingham, 2012). Notice how the laws are not only moral or ethical codes of conduct but more of a lifestyle of living. They go beyond ensuring the individuals following the law are doing the right thing, but actually looking out for others in society. Once the people received the law, it was time to put it into practice.

**The judges apply the law.** When the people of Israel finally made it to the promise land is was a perfect opportunity to live out a lifestyle that God so desired. God cleared and provided a land for the people to build a nation where the conduct of lifestyle was guided by the law. God wanted the people of Israel to show what it meant to be a people of justice, people that cared for each other. But over time, the people started “to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there” (Deuteronomy 18:9 NIV). They begin to do evil in the eyes of the Lord. God would become angry with their misconduct and the people of Israel would fall into the hands of the neighboring nation where they would be oppressed. It was because of the people’s lack of keeping just living that lead them into oppression.

To free them from oppression, God sent the Judges to remind the people of Israel how to conduct themselves accordingly. God choose judges from the marginalized to bring freedom to his people. Ehud was a left-handed man (Judges 2:15 NIV). Gideon was from the weakest clan (Judges 6:15 NIV). Jephthah was born of a prostitute (Judges 11:1 NIV). Samson came from a barren mother (Judges 13:3 NIV). Many more of the Judges came from the least of the Israelites and lead them back to following the laws of God.

It was when the people of Israel were following the laws that they saw freedom in their lives. To follow the laws, they would have had to be showing justice as described. They had to be focused on keeping relation with God. They had to not be self-centered as Adam and Eve were in the fall. However, the use of judges was not enough to keep the people of Israel living lives to protect the community. The spirit of God came only on people when there was a need for redemption. This plays an important part in the Kingdom that is established when Jesus comes. The Spirit of God was not living in each person that followed God at the time and their human nature took over. The people of Israel chose themselves over God and wanted to have a human king rule them instead of God himself.

**Prophets to the kings**. When the nation of Israel failed to maintain social justice under the kings, God sent a reminder. The establishment of kings meant there was a human king that had the responsibility to maintain social order. He is to “revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites” (Deuteronomy 17:19-20 NIV) The reminder to the kings to maintain social justice from the prophets was was not a judgment of a law broken, but rather a call to repentance and return to proper living of the law. These reminders in the Old Testament during the time of the kings until the intertestamental period came in the form of the prophets. “Finally, they [the people of Israel] were unjust in their dealings with one another, especially with the minority people and the poor in their midst” that God had to do something (Glasser, 2003, p. 128). The prophets did give warning that there would be consequences if the people failed to adhere to the repentance but the goal was to insure justice was outworked. Again and again there is a message of returning to caring for the marginalized.

The Prophets message always carried the same theme. The people of Israel were to stop being self-centered and be more outwardly focused. They were “making his [their] own people work for nothing, not paying them for their labor” (Jeremiah 22:13 NIV). They had turned their relationship into religion that was self-centered which God “despise[ed] your [their] religious festivals” and their “assemblies were a stench to me [him]” (Amos 5:21 NIV). The prophets reminded them to “defend the cause of the poor and needy and so all went well” (Jeremiah 22:16 NIV). The people needed to “wash and make yourselves [themselves] clean. Take [their] evil deed out of [his] sight; stop doing wrong. Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (Isiah 1:16-17 NIV). These themes resounded again and again for hundreds of years. Ultimately the people did not listen and the people were taken into captivity.

What the people needed was a new order to be established. Even after many warnings and being put into exile very little progress was made to establish a kingdom of God that kept justice at the center. The prophets wrote about a new order that was coming. The new order would be “a faithful custodian of the good news of the Kingdom of God mean[ing] that one seeks to be the sort of person who is dominated by a heightened concern for social justice and the poor”(Glasser, 2003, p. 118). After 400 plus years of what is called “silence” in the God’s people, the new order was proclaimed.

**Kingdom Justice in the New Testament**

**Inauguration of a Kingdom.** When Jesus finally came to earth, a kingdom filled with justice was ready to be announced. Israel was under rule of the Roman Empire. Jews wanted justice to be brought against the people that were oppressing them. They had freedom to worship their own God but not freedom like the nation of Israel used to have in the times of David. “This new Adam would rule in a new Eden over a renewed and enlarged Israel” (Glasser, 2003, p. 147). But the Kingdom that God was about to establish contained bigger ideas then justice for just the Israelites. “This is consonant with the earlier witness of the prophets that to know the Lord is to be actively committed to seeking justice for [all] the poor” (Glasser, 2003, p. 157). But Jewish nation of the first century were not looking to spread the Kingdom to all people, as it was the attitude in David era, but rather to hold on to what they had. The Jews wanted justice for just themselves. “The Israelites manifested virtually no concern over the world’s spiritual darkens but were greatly concerned for God’s vindication before the nations (Glasser, 2003, p. 151). Jesus was to bring justice for all of humanity.

What Jesus did leading up to his death and resurrection was important to setting an order to the Kingdom he announced. The death, sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus are essential to establish the new kingdom order but are only part of the story. He came and announced a kingdom of justice. “The coming of the Kingdom is to provide tangible manifestation of God’s attitude toward poverty and injustice” (Glasser, 2003, p. 216). All four Gospels indicate a king that came to seek justice. Jesus actions affirm his proclamation. “He called the professing people of God to practice kindness and brotherhood” (Glasser, 2003, p. 202). Jesus was setting a standard to which his Kingdom would be known by. In that included how to seek justice. When Jesus was resurrected and left the earth, he sent help to make sure this would happen. The Holy Spirt came to keep justice in the Kingdom.

**The beginnings of the Kingdom.** Jesus created an order within his kingdom that was meant to proclaim the good news of the established. The writers of the New Testament call that order the “church”. Recognize that “the church does not establish the Kingdom. It is rather the custodians of the good news of the Kingdom” (Glasser, 2003, p. 225). In the Kingdom, Jesus is to be worshiped, Holy Spirt will lead action, and the church will proclaim the Kingdom. What it means for the people of the church is to live a lifestyle that represents the kingdom.

Jesus Kingdom seeks and teaches justice and thus expected the followers in the Kingdom with the arrival of the Holy Spirit to do likewise. As detailed previously, in the Old Testament the people of the Jewish Kingdom were to seek justice. “The churches’ mission of announcing the Kingdom of God must also include seeking justice for the poor and minority peoples; apposing all forms of racism, sexism, and exploitation; and promoting disarmament and world peace” (Glasser, 2003, p. 343). This was a justice that looked after the marginalized. It ensured everyone had their daily needs meet and were being blessed by others. Jesus, in the gospels, continued to proclaim a kingdom filled with justice, but now in a new way. And there is evidence the early church started to put this to practice. The Kingdom of God today is no different. The only difference is in how God will make this happen. The Holy Spirit has enabled people of the Kingdom to take personal responsibility for the growth of the Kingdom. “And everywhere the Apostles went, signs of the Kingdom accompanied their witness” (Glasser, 2003, p. 275). Christians are to do like the Apostles and create signs of justice to be a witness to the Kingdom.

Holy Spirit Will Enable Justice Of The Kingdom To Be Outworked Through Individuals

Holy Spirit will enable justice of the Kingdom to be outworked through individuals. “Whereas the Kingdom of God was already ‘at hand’ prior to the cross, its full eschatological revelation was possible only after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, an outpouring directed to all the surrounding nations listed as examples in Acts 2” (Glasser, 2003, p. 313). When the Holy Spirt came on the followers at Pentecost, they now had a helper to do what Jesus was doing prior to his resurrection. Between the resurrection of Jesus and Pentecost, the Apostles were told to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was only after they received the Holy Spirt were they in full power to announce the Kingdom. Now, anyone who receives the Holy Spirit and belongs to the kingdom has the authority to bring Kingdom justice.

**A Kingdom of Justice Today**

Kingdom justice is seen in the way humanity interacts with the word around itself. Dr. Viv Grigg (1984), in Companion to the Poor, tells of a story of mansion being built on the profits of exploiting the poor in the Philippines using the ‘five-six’ system (p. 163). The land owner was using the poor to pay for his own house. The world’s perception of justice would ask questions such as was the rich following the law? Did he do anything wrong? In the rich Filipino’s social location, did he have every worldly right to do what he did? Since the rich in this story was not breaking the law, he could not be brought to justice. But this kind of justice is not what God is establishing in his kingdom. In Zachariah 7:9, God tells us to “administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another” (Zachariah 7:9 NIV). Where was the compassion and mercy by the rich to the poor in the story of the mansion? The way justice need to be carried out in a Kingdom of God is by looking out for one another and caring for those in need.

As the Kingdom of God is announced in the in the world today, Christians need to be active in promoting justice. “This era would be characterized by the people of God making Jesus Christ known as Lord and Savior to all peoples. Their central focus would be on him for , in essence, he supremely constitutes the Kingdom” (Glasser, 2003, p. 317). Having seen that justice is part of announcing the Kingdom, justice is what followers of Jesus need to be doing. The day to day life of a follower should be characterized by seeking justice in a biblical way. This is outworked in each person’s life very differently, but each person has a part to play. It’s when non-kingdom followers start to see the justice outworked in the kingdom that they will start to take interest in the kingdom.

As non-Kingdom followers begin to see the justice of God outworked by the Holy Spirt, it will be hard for them to deny the presence of the Kingdom at hand. Jesus told his followers to “obey everything [he] commanded. And surly [he is] with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20 NIV). Jesus was telling his followers that as he works through them, it will be evident that he is present. This requires action on behalf of those that follow. As followers of Jesus actively outwork justice by the Holy Spirit, people will see the justice and recognize Jesus. It’s the repetitive presence of justice that the Kingdom will be built.

Ten years ago a team in Sydney knocked on Brian’s door to show him justice. Brian laughed at them and slammed the door on them. Over the next ten years Brian would continue to poke fun of the team and heckle them as they came by week in and week out. But when Brian found himself at a place of desperation, he turned to the people that continued to show him justice. He found himself at the feet of the King (Allen, 2015). It was because Kingdom followers sought to show justice that people responded to the Kingdom. It was not justice that condemned Brian for his actions, but rather justice that showed kindness and love to Brian in his situation.

When the news channels tuned into, morning papers read, and social media forms scanned and the world around us seems to be in chaos, Kingdom followers need turn and seek ways to establish the Kingdom of God. Promote justice. Not justice that condemns, but one that promotes equality of the poor, marginalized and oppressed. When the people of the Kingdom are actively seeking justice then people will know that Jesus is for justice.

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