

# Christians Look at Justice

## Justice in Our World

There is no denying the reality of injustice all over the world. There is no escaping the fact that human beings seem all too willing to treat each other badly because they hate or fear each other, because they put profits before people, or because they somehow convince themselves that it's justified.

Justice has been a concern of God and his people from the days of the Old Testament, and it's mentioned many times there, as well as in the New Testament.

Use your Bible to find these verses about justice. Match up the numbered passages with the lettered phrases that tell what each one is about.

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|---------------------|--|
| 1. Proverbs 21:15   | a. A story of some people who change their minds when "justice" does not work out the way they expected it to. |
| 2. Isaiah 10:1-4    |  |
| 3. Micah 3:1-3      | b. One to whom justice was denied.   |
| 4. Matthew 23:23-24 | c. A warning for those who ignore justice.   |
| 5. Acts 8:32-33     | d. Good people love justice; bad people hate it.   |
| 6. Acts 28:1-6      | e. Faith in God is what enables people to act with justice.  |
| 7. Hebrews 11:32-34 | f. Jesus hotly reproveth the Pharisees about justice and other things.   |
|                     | g. Those responsible for teaching people right from wrong are denounced for their sins.                        |



Based on these readings, or on your own ideas, or on a combination of the two, write your definition of justice:

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## Modern Questions about Justice

The city of Prague, in what is now the Czech Republic, is thought by many to be one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. But during the Second World War, this beautiful city saw many ugly things happening within its borders. The Nazis named as “protector” of the area a very cruel and ambitious German officer, Reinhard Heydrich. Heydrich was assassinated by Czech resistance fighters, who took refuge in a church in Prague. The priest of the church hid them from the Nazis for quite some time, but eventually they were found. The priest, whose name was Gorazd, offered his own life in return for the lives of the resistance fighters, and was taken and tortured by the Nazis. He died soon after, worn out by the suffering he had endured. A few years ago, the Orthodox Church in the Czech Republic declared Gorazd to be a saint and a martyr.

Some people might ask whether the priest was serving the cause of justice in hiding from the authorities a group of men who had murdered another man, no matter how strongly hated that man was. Yet the church saw St. Gorazd’s action as an attempt to save the lives of the resistance fighters, and his exchange of his own life for theirs as an act of true Christian selflessness.

How would *you* define justice in this situation?

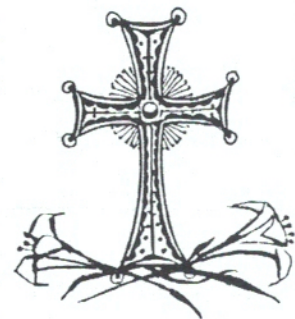
In many Armenian families, the terrible stories of what the Turks did in 1915 can never be erased from memory. There has been no acknowledgment or apology, which makes the memory even more awful for the victims to bear.

Yet here and there we hear survivors tell of Turks and Kurds who tried to help their Armenian neighbors, who took risks for them and showed them kindness. Would justice be served if we condemned all Turks, and their descendants? What do *you* think?

## A Christian View of Justice

One of the Bible passages you looked at earlier, **Acts 8:32-33**, quotes from the prophet Isaiah with these words: “In his humiliation justice was denied him.” This, of course, applies to Jesus Christ, whose life and deeds were foretold by the Old Testament prophets.

So, what do the words mean? Christ came to bring peace and justice and love to everyone, yet he was denied justice himself. And this is the example he gives us: to behave justly to everyone else, but not necessarily to seek or expect justice for ourselves. In fact, in **Matthew 5:11** Jesus teaches, “Blessed (sometimes translated as *happy*) are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”





In his dealings with others, Christ always showed us that mercy is an important part of justice. You remember the story of the woman who had been caught in adultery (**John 8:3-11**). Jesus certainly mixes mercy with strict justice here, and yet we could never say that—as a politician might put it—he was soft on crime. He himself told the woman not to sin anymore.

A parable about workers in a vineyard (read it in **Matthew 20:1-16**) also shows mercy mixed with justice. Put yourself in the parable: if you were one of the latecomers, you would feel fortunate indeed. How would you feel if you were one of those working since the early morning? What do you think we are being told here about justice?

## Following Christ's Teachings



Christ certainly intended that there should be justice in the world, and we know of times when he was angry (for example, with the Pharisees) seeing people treat others unjustly.

His disciples, and indeed the church, followed his example of justice tempered with mercy. Try the following activity, which tells about some unjust situations that were made right by Jesus or the apostles. Then consider whether there is any similar situation in your school, neighborhood, or home. What might you do to make it right?



## Making It Right

<p>Read the following Scripture passage and describe the unfair situation.</p>	<p>How was it corrected?</p>	<p>Is there something like this going on in your school, neighborhood or home? What is it?</p>	<p>How can you correct it?</p>
<p>Acts 6:1-6</p>			
<p>John 2:13-17</p>			
<p>Luke 7:36-50</p>			
<p>Luke 9:49-50</p>			
<p>Luke 22:47-53</p>			
<p>Matthew 8:28-34</p>			



## How Did the Early Church Look at Justice?

One of the biggest questions for the church was this: What happened to the spiritual life of people who committed crimes? Christians of those days were, perhaps, more serious about their faith than many modern Christians. For them, not to be able to take Holy Communion was a terrible deprivation. Here is a canon (which means church law) from the group of canons put together by St. Basil:

He that commits murder, and afterwards repents, shall for twenty years remain without partaking of the Holy Sacrament. Four years he must stand outside the door of the church in prayer, and beg the worshippers going in to pray for him; then for five years he shall be let inside the doors to hear the service from the rear of the church only; for seven years he may come closer to the front of the church; for four years he may stand with those taking communion but not take it himself; when these years are completed he may partake of the Holy Sacrament.



Answer these questions:

1. What is the thing that the murderer must do first in order to be allowed back into communion with the church?
2. The church teaches that refusing Holy Communion to a murderer for a time is not punishment, but concern for the murderer's own soul. Read **1 Corinthians 11:27-32**. How do the words of St. Paul reflect that concern?
3. What would you say is the best description of the church's views:
  - a. A murderer should be separated from the rest of humanity forever, being unworthy of human contact.
  - b. When someone murders, it's probably because of a terrible childhood or some deep problem, and forgiveness should be offered freely.
  - c. A murderer is a person who is responsible for a terrible act which requires deep repentance and long years of prayer. Yet the murderer is still a child of God, and God's love is still there for all his children if they recognize and repent of their sins.



## To Sum Up

In this session, we have looked at the Christian view of justice from several angles.

We know that:

God wants justice for his people.

Part of justice is for each person to be just and loving to everyone else. These little bits of justice can add up to a just world.

Christ taught us that justice is mixed with mercy.

Repentance must be part of our life if we expect mercy and justice. We are responsible for what we do.



# Christians Look at Justice

## Key Concepts



1. Christianity teaches that justice is mixed with mercy.
2. As Christians, we are called to be responsible for our own actions and treating others justly.

## Objectives



*Students will:*

1. Define "justice" in their own words, based on readings from Scripture and their own understanding.
2. Enumerate some ways justice is described in the New Testament.
3. Assess unfair situations in their own lives and experience.
4. Examine an important church law developed in the early church, dealing with murder, penance, and justice.



## Background for Teacher



What is the Christian concept of justice? One of the things Christ told us is that God is merciful and does not exact from us the full price of our sins and our wrongdoing, but at the same time he is a just judge. This session will give students an understanding of several points: God is merciful but also holds us responsible for our actions; we are to be merciful and just to each other; as followers of Christ we may expect that the world will not always treat us justly; God will always be just to us if we repent of our sins so that we can accept his love.

- ◆ Bibles
- ◆ Pens or pencils

## Materials Needed



**1.** Open with a prayer. Have the class do the exercise in **Justice in Our World**, in the student text. (Answers: 1-d, 2-c, 3-g, 4-f, 5-b, 6-a, 7-e.) Let them create and then share their definitions of “justice.”

(12 mins)

**2.** The next section, **Modern Questions about Justice**, can be read and briefly discussed. Try to include in the discussion that justice is not always a black-and-white issue, which will get them ready to think about justice in the way Jesus taught it—tempered with mercy.

(8 mins)

**3.** The idea of justice that is tempered with mercy and love for the particular person is underscored in **A Christian View of Justice**. Review key points with students, reading all Scripture references together. You might bring into the discussion the fact that Jesus did not seek political justice for the Jews (which disappointed some of them) and that he certainly did not always go by rules of worldly “fairness,” as we see in the parable of the

## Procedure





workers in the vineyard. (Certainly some of the workers who had been toiling all day might have felt short-changed and resentful, but Jesus' point is that God loves all equally.)

The idea of not seeking justice for oneself, as Jesus did not, is a hard one for all of us to accept. Yet we know that giving up our life, foregoing shrill insistence on our rights, and not seeking our own benefit before that of others really is the way to the kingdom, where all things will be ours.

(10 mins)

**4. Following Christ's Teachings**, in the student text, reminds students that they can do something about justice, even if it seems like something very small. Small acts of justice at home, at school, in the community really will add up to a more just society.

The Bible activity, **Making It Right**, should be self-explanatory and is probably best done in pairs.

(15 mins)

**5. In How Did the Early Church Look at Justice?** your students are given a very vivid example of the justice tempered with mercy that Christ taught. Emphasize in the discussion that the church considers us to be responsible for whatever we do, unless there are very unusual circumstances. Yet there is no sin that cannot be forgiven. The one necessity is that we repent of our sins.

In talking about repentance, it may be necessary to define the word clearly. To repent is to acknowledge our sin as sin, to be sorry for it, to make any restitution it requires, and to resolve and work not to repeat it. (You might want to put the definition in different words.)

Also, be clear in saying that we do not repent in order to "satisfy God," but for our own spiritual health. If we do not recognize our sin and try to overcome it, we will never be ready to meet God in the day of judgment and find our way into the kingdom.



Answers to the three questions:

1) repent

2) St. Paul's words show that if we take communion while in a state of sinfulness (anger at someone, stealing something that we haven't given back, hating someone), we are endangering ourselves because we cannot receive Christ with a clear conscience that has nothing to hide. The murderer must, through prayer and humility, regain that clear conscience. And when the sin is as great as murder, that will take a long time.

3) c

(10 mins)

**6.** Review with **To Sum Up** and end with a prayer. (5 mins)