What the Bible Has to Do with It: God's Justice and Social Justice in Matthew's Gospel Account

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"I just don't see what the *Bible* has to do with *Justice!*" This was the response of a parishioner as I began to lead our congregation through our denominational study document on a proposed social statement called *Justice for Women*. We hadn't even opened the booklet. The congregation that I was serving was a predominately progressive, socially minded group of people and so, while I anticipated a variety of questions, I hadn't expected this. Many Bible passages began rolling through my head as I debated how to speak to what I considered to be the undeniable and inextricable connection between the Bible and Justice. I considered, for example:

> "God has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the LORD require of you
> but to do *justice*, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Ultimately, though, I did not quote the Bible. Assuming my interlocutor was already familiar with many of the passages running through my head, I asked instead what she meant by her question. As I suspected, this woman was well aware of the abundant biblical calls to justice. She didn't mind *justice*. What she had a problem with was *social* justice. Social justice, she felt, was too *political* for church.

Although I could not then articulate the legal or philosophical distinctions underpinning her critique, in that moment I felt a flood of righteous indignation, closely followed by the guilty sting of one convicted. My indignation harkened back to third-grade government lessons on the "blindness" of justice complemented by Sunday school lessons around the same period on the justice of God. Yet, I also recognized that most of the social justice causes I had rallied behind since then *did* happen to align with my leftist political orientation. Like many, I was guilty of using the terms "justice" and "social justice" interchangeably without studied reflection.

This realization has since prompted study and, as it turns out, my interlocutor was not all wrong about the political underpinnings of the term "social justice." The phrase has its origins parallel to the political development of socialist principles in nineteenth century Europe. More recently, in a 2006 statement, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social affairs similarly describes the concept of social justice as "politically charged."[1] The same study elaborates, "In the contemporary context, social justice is typically taken to mean distributive justice," and as such, is associated with a tripartite appeal for equality of rights, opportunities, and living conditions.[2] To this end, social justice has become "a rallying cry for progressive thinkers and political activists" around the world, generally associated with leftist (and sometimes centrist) politics.[3] Justice, particularly social justice, is not apolitical. Contemporary catalogues of justice tend to define the concept into three concepts: social justice, concerned with the well-being of those *within* a political state; international justice, concerned with relationships *between* political states; and criminal justice, concerned with the fair execution of the laws *of* a political state. My third-grade civics class was about the latter, which at least aspirationaly or ideologically, can be conceived as politically neutral, even though actual policies rarely live out this ideal so neatly. Beyond that, inasmuch as concepts of justice address the interplay of people both within and between political states (in Greek, *polis*), it will, definitionally, have something to do with the *polis*, and so, be political. Moreover, and I think more to the original point, to the extent that people within a *polis* disagree about the best way to administer the welfare and right relations represented by such concepts, justice will always entail the form

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1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, *The International Forum for Social Development: Social Justice in an Open World: The Role of the United Nations* (New York: United Nations, 2006) 11.
2. Ibid., 13, 15–16.
3. Ibid., 12.

of *partisan* politics that puts United States churchgoers on edge.

This said, social justice need not be seen as a code word for a particular political party or politician's platform. Even understood synonymously with distributive justice, advocating for or pursuing social justice does not necessarily entail the support of any particular political party or candidates. Just as the neutrality of criminal justice is an aspirational concept, so, too, the application of distributive justice remains aspirational for even the most well-intentioned politicians today. Social justice is not partisan because it is aligned with "democrats" or "republicans," but rather because there is more than one way to think about it and its application. Indeed, even within the two major U.S. political parties there are differing opinions both on the value and the application of distributive justice. What is more, the same can be said about nearly every principle put forward in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures—people have and will continue to disagree about what they mean and how to apply them. This does not and should not, however, stop us as people of faith from attempting to do so.

As already alluded to, there are many biblical texts through which one can explore concepts of God's justice. Within my contemporary white protestant context, however, Matthew's gospel account stands out. Matthew stands out not because of its disproportionate references to justice, but rather, because of disproportionate references to *it*, specifically Matthew's 25th chapter, in discussing issues of justice—both social and personal. Matthew 25 has been cited across Christian history to support what could be considered a social justice agenda, entailing: feeding the poor, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned (Matt 25:31–40). In the twenty-first century United States, particularly within middle to upper class leftist Christianity, care for "the least of these" (Matt 25:40) has become a social justice rally cry.[4] At the same time, the larger context of this passage as a description of God's future judgment of the nations, suggests a different kind of justice. This justice, framed within parabolic criminal court proceedings, points to God's just treatment of people according to their deeds, which can be read as a very individualist proceeding quite separate (or even at odds) with a larger social agenda.

This essay seeks to read Matthew 25 within the context of Matthew's gospel account as a whole, in search of a holistic understanding of justice in Matthew's gospel account. Accepting Matthew's account as one of the foundational texts of today's Christian church, I will then interrogate whether social justice as a principle fits into Matthew's definition of Justice and consequently, whether or not social justice is, by Matthew's account, "too political for church." To answer this, this essay will interrogate the relationship between the church and the *polis* in Matthew's Roman dominated context, establish a definition of justice as it is portrayed in Matthew's gospel account, and compare this reading of Matthean justice to contemporary articulations of justice (social, criminal, and international) in order to contextualize biblical calls for justice for a twenty-first century church.

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Church and state in Matthew's gospel account

Most scholars estimate that Matthew's gospel account was written around the year 85 CE, approximately ten years after the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple. There is division as to whether Matthew's audience was made up primarily of Jewish or Gentile believers, but it seems likely that the gospel account was written with some combination of both populations in mind. In this context, the Matthean author is interested in the right relation between members of an increasingly diversified community. In the wake of a frightening display of the destructive power of the Roman army, not only in the annihilation of the Temple but in the slaughter of entire cities of peoples, a majority of the Roman-dominated population was struggling to make sense of their new reality and to survive.

The Roman-dominated populations living in Judea and Galilee had limited authority over their own lives, let alone the governance of their communities. Taxes were due to Caesar (Matt 22:17) and prior to its destruction, additional taxes or tithes paid to the temple helped to support the temple hierarchy, also in service of Rome. Within this context, when Jesus is quoted as commanding, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21), it is not to draw a distinction between the realms of state and religion, but rather to place God's authority above both. This teaching is immediately followed up in Matthew's gospel by the temple hierarchy, whose authority derives from their fealty to Rome, demanding to know the source of Jesus' authority (*exousia,* Matt 22:23–27). That Jesus' authority extends over both the heavenly, religious realm and the earthly, political realm is later confirmed when the risen Jesus commissions his followers to proclaim the good news of God's Reign with the assurance, "All authority [*exousia*] in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18). Nothing belongs to Caesar alone, everything and everyone are under the power and authority of God.

Whatever their other differences, the Jewish and Christian sects of the first century were all ultimately people trying to live as people of God within their changing social and political context.

4. Kevin DeYoung, "Seven Passages on Social Justice (4)," in *The Gospel Coalition* (13 April 2010), https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/seven-passages-on-social-justice-4/ accessed 20 May 2019; See also Office of Social Justice (Christian Reformed Church in North America), "The Matthew 25 Movement," http://justice.crcna.org/matthew-25-movement accessed 20 May 2019.

In this sense, they were no different from contemporary social groupings of ordinary citizens, both Jew and Gentile, striving to live according to their religious and ethical mandates in an oppressive and exploitative empire. Christ followers called their vision of justice the Reign of God. Other Jewish groups were working toward the same sort of love of God and neighbor, laying the antecedents for the contemporary Jewish principle of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world).[5] The common objective was to live with God and one another in a way that represented right relationship for the sake not just of the individual but of the whole society and, indeed, the world (Gen 12:1-3; Matt 28:18-20).

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Justice in Matthew's gospel account

The difference between Matthew's audience and their contemporaries, across religious and ethnic communities (Christian and Jewish), was not in an increased desire by either group to see God's justice at work in the world or even their work to bring God's justice about; rather, the difference was in their approach. For Matthew, pursuit of God's justice involves adherence to and, indeed, fulfillment of God's law. On this count, Matthew is meticulous. Although Luke propends to write an "orderly account," the Matthean author seems to value order as much (if not more) than his Lukan counterpart. It thus comes as little surprise that in Matthew's gospel and nowhere else, we encounter Jesus proclaiming, "I have not come to abolish [the law or the prophets] but to fulfill" (Matt 5:17). Indeed, Jesus declares, "not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matt 5:18). In Matthew's account, things are said and done by the book.

At its most basic, doing things right or in an orderly fashion, "by the book," is what is meant by *dikaiosunai* (trans. righteousness, NRSV) throughout Matthew's gospel account—that which is according to the law, in good order (cf. Matt 3:15; 5:20). For Matthew, though, *dikaiosunai* does not reflect the mere *appearance* of order, but rather comes from the inside out, condemning those who "on the outside look righteous (*dikaiosunai*), but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt 23:28). For Matthew, righteousness is not about ticking off a set of obligations or aligning with the right group or party, it is about *living* in the right way, inside and out. His critique is therefore not about the Jewish principle of adherence to the law, but rather the way in which the temple hierarchy was applying this principle.

Matthew's gospel portrays an active struggle between the law and its application, a struggle which, in some ways comes to a head in the future judgment described in Matthew 25. The issue at stake in this judgment scene is not simply whether or not the nations have kept God's covenant law, which calls for all of the actions mentioned in vv. 35–36, also, whether in keeping the law, they have cared for God God's self. Gerhard Kittel explains with regard to the use of *dikaiosunai* in the New Testament, "Fidelity to the law is often at issue, but with a stress on the relationship with God."[6] In effect, Matthew remains loyal to the covenant expectations of the Hebrew Bible, but reframes the "book."

This is in keeping with a Midrashic interpretation of Scripture typical of Matthew's first-century Jewish context. Certain biblical texts, including the many prophesies cited in Matthew, are employed in service of an overarching interpretation of Scripture. In Matthew's case, the scriptures are employed to show that Jesus is the Son of Man, sent by God in fulfillment of God's covenant with God's people. In other words, for Matthew, Jesus is a sign of God's justice—that all is "right" in the world between God and humanity.

Through this lens, keeping the law need not imply a legalistic observance of a code as it was written centuries earlier so much as a dynamic engagement with and interpretation of that code's meaning for the contemporary context. Justice, therefore, is not only about what can be seen by or practiced in front of others (Matt 6:1), but also and more importantly about what is in a person's heart (Matt 13:15). Matthew's Jesus does not abolish Jewish law or prophets, as demonstrated in the continued concern for right action in Matt 25:31–46, but rather, reframes them for his time and place. In this Matthew is no different from the Pharisees, whose devotion to traditions and observances represented meticulous care for the enactment of God's law in their present time.

Matthew's interpretation of how God's law best applied to his present society, however, is different. Both Jewish Christ followers and Jewish Pharisees sought to lay a path for a community struggling with what it means to keep God's law in the wake of the temple's destruction.[7] As a Christ follower, Matthew does so in light of his belief in God's incarnation in Jesus and ultimate resurrection as Christ. In the midst of chaos and confusion, Matthew's gospel account thus seeks to restore order. Foundational to such order as Matthew describes it is living in right relationship

5. Although the modern concept of *tikkun olam* in relation to social justice took shape in the United States in the 1950s, the connected between a Jewish belief in the need for the healing of the world has its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures (Isa 1:17; Jer 7:5–7; Hos 10:12, and so forth) and can be seen to take shape in relation to the social order as early as the Jewish *Mishnah* (Mishnah Gittin 4:2–3, 6, circa 200 CE).

6. TDNT 171

7. See Robert R. Beck, *Jesus and HIS Enemies: Narrative Conflict in the Four Gospels* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2017), 77–88.

with God, who has authority over all things and who remains incarnationally present in the *adelphoi* (family of God, Matt 25:40). This pursuit of righteousness (*dikaiosunai*) is at the center of Matthew's account.

While *dikaiosunai* can and often is translated as "justice" in a sweeping sense, the most widely used contemporary English translations (NRSV, NIV, and KJV), translate it almost exclusively with the related term "righteousness." As a result, in these translations the English word "justice" only appears three times in Matthew's account, even though the concept of justice/righteousness is present throughout. In each of these cases in Matthew, "justice" translates not *dikaiosunai*, but rather the Greek word *krisin* (Matt 12:18, 20; 23:23). The verb *krisin* and its cognates appears throughout the LXX and New Testament usually in relation to an official decision or judgment. In contrast to the relative obscurity of this more legalistic form of justice, the word *dikaiosunai* appears in Matthew's gospel seven times and words deriving from its root total twenty-six occurrences. A full exploration of Matthew's concept of justice must consider both terms.

Krisin represents one component of justice in Matthew to be sure, but this narrow sense of the term does not do justice (pun intended) to the overarching theme of God's justice throughout Matthew's gospel account. *Krisin* represents the protective or punitive aspects of God's law, with affinities to a contemporary criminal justice code. Matthew suggests that this is a natural and unavoidable element of living in relationship with a just God, a relationship portrayed, though the word *krisin* is never used, in the final judgment scene of Matthew 25. Understanding the role of *krisin* within Matthew's understanding of justice can thus help to illuminate the interweaving threads of justice that play out at this point in Matthew's account.

Thought of as *one* of three components of justice, *krisin* becomes an important, though not exclusive, element in Matthew's understanding of divine justice. In Matthew 23, Jesus critiques the scribes and Pharisees not for executing the law, but for emphasizing a single component to the neglect of the others. In this context, Matthew's Jesus names "justice (*krisin*) and mercy and faith" as "weightier matters of the law," to be "practiced without neglecting the others" (Matt 23:23). This parallels the description of God's justice in Psalm 116:5, praising God as both "righteous" (δίκαιος, LXX) and "merciful."[8] For Matthew, judgment and mercy do not serve as two opposing poles, but rather as complementary aspects of God's holistic justice, or right orientation with and between people. Similarly, in 1 John God is described as "faithful and just (δίκαιος)," forgiving sins and cleansing "all unrighteousness (ἀδικίας)" (1 John 1:9).

Jesus does not reject the more penal qualities of the law enacted through the giving and receiving of offerings and sacrifices, but rather emphasizes that this is only one aspect and not the *whole* of a right, or just relationship with God. Within this context, those who are welcomed and sent from the divine presence in Matt 25:34, 41 are not punished in the language of a reciprocal form of justice for failure to act. Rather, the sheep and the goats are each continuing in the form of relationship in which they have already been engaging the incarnate God, who with mercy and faithfulness remains present and oriented towards a human family made up of all the nations.

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Matthew holds these twin concepts of judgment and mercy together within a singular principle of Justice oriented within the community of God's family—Jewish, Christian, and those spanning the nations (see Matt 25:32, 40). This should not be surprising as, contextually, Matthew reorients his interpretation of God's justice away from impartial mediation in the Temple and toward communal relationships in the Reign of God as Jesus proclaimed it. Such justice is not meted out by God from on high, but rather manifest and manifesting itself in love of the other as Jesus practiced it (Matt 6:33; 25:37).

This is where justice as righteousness comes into play. Righteousness is a deep and beautiful concept that has been the source of much theological reflection. In the contexts in which it is used in Matthew, righteousness seems to refer to a sense of right (or orderly) relationship with God consistent to Matthew's commitment to the proper execution of the law. Unfortunately, in part because of this, in U.S. English "righteousness" has come, more often than not, to connote such religious and theological meanings that it effectively evades any single definition whatsoever when pressed for a colloquial definition.

The term "justice" is increasingly prey to a similar fate, however, at least for the present, it retains a more basic grounding in what is "right" or "fair" or "just" in the course of human affairs. Because of this human-to-human connection, I find the term "justice" more helpful as a translation of *dikaiosunai* that readily draws analogy between God-to-human and human-to-God relations, as well as in picturing how God desires for humans to continue to relate to one another. Moreover, this translation of *dikaiosunai* as justice enables readers to engage God's justice in Matthew's gospel account not solely in the legalistic sense of a judge on a throne

8. See TDNT 169.

(Matt 12:18, 20), but more holistically as a part of God's loving desire for God's people to observe the law and the prophets in such a way that justice, mercy, and faith join together for the sake of the other (Matt 23:23). That is, a *social* justice.

Applications: Justice in the twenty-first century church

The word "social" speaks to the interpersonal dimensions of such justice, concerned as it is not with the equal application of laws (as in the criminal justice taught in my government class), or with equity between nations (as in the international justice of the UN), but with equity between the individuals in each nation and, indeed, between the people of the world. Whereas criminal and international justice both rely on, though fail to realize, an ideal of political neutrality, social justice demands that the arbiter adopt an interested perspective from the start. This is necessary both to clearly recognize the inequities in need of redress and to affirm the rights and dignity of all people on either side of such inequities.

Such an "interested," or biased perspective is similarly implied in the Son of Humanity's reference to the divine presence in all those whom the "sheep" came alongside in their need. The expectation is not to do good works for those in need because it is the law, but rather, to recognize that it is the law because it reflects one's right relationship with God and humanity. In other words, the "sheep" are commended for acting in favor of the "interests" of the marginalized; for caring for their fellow human beings.

The objection that social justice is too politically charged for a church to address has less to do with its potential interference with the governing of the earthly kingdom and more to do with a concern that such commitments may accurately or inaccurately suggest a congregation's political "interests," or leanings in the two-party system of the United States. In an effort to appear disinterested (or unbiased), a different group from the same congregation mentioned above advocated for footnoting the term social justice in a proposed mission statement, clarifying that in seeking social justice we as a congregation were interested in living out Jesus' commendation in Matt 25:34–40 to give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcome to the stranger, clothing to the naked, care to the sick, and companionship to the imprisoned. The goal was to disassociate the congregation's social action from

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political language and associate it instead with the language of scripture. A close reading of Matthew's language around justice, however, suggests that it is just this kind of *interest* in the human community, especially the marginalized, that defines one's right orientation to scripture. In so much as it seeks the well-being of and recognizes the incarnational presence of God in the other, social justice *is* biblical justice.

In a manner closely paralleled to Jesus' midrashic applications of *dikaiosunai*, twenty-first century social justice movements tend to emphasize the value of the dignity of people over and against strict adherence to laws. The Black Lives Matter movement and their slogan of the same name epitomize this value of personhood in all its particularities. Indeed, black liberation movements have been and continue to be at the forefront of connections between social justice as a philosophical ideal and its lived reality in the social and political sphere. Critical theorist Magnus O. Bassey explains, "Africana critical theory is perhaps one of the few philosophies that is concerned enough to demand that public policy be informed by the spirit of equity, social justice, and fairness to the group—a philosophy for human beings or personhood."[9] Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins elaborates on the experience of personhood as an embodiment of an individual's particularities—race, gender, age, socio-economic status, ability or disability, and so forth—that dialogically inform one another, a concept she terms "intersectionality." Biblically, one might think of an emphasis on the intersections of a person's identity as attention to their *holistic* self in relation to God. It is within this context of lived intersectional personhood that I suggest God's justice as portrayed in Matthew's gospel is *social justice*.

9. Magnus O. Bassey, "What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?" in *Journal of Black Studies* 37:6 (2007), 925.