

RECOGNIZE INJUSTICE

JOHN 7:53–8:11



It is fair to say that those at the receiving end of injustice are most able to recognize injustice as they are affected directly. The person forced to wait longer in line because a group of people jumped in line ahead of them without waiting their turn can easily see the wrong.

Yet it is more difficult for those who commit the injustice or benefit from it to recognize what is wrong. While we may have moral compasses informing us of right and wrong, we also have strong defense mechanisms that make it difficult to recognize injustice in our actions. Think of the child accused of cheating in a board game: “Who, me? How dare you blame me!”

Then there are the bystanders, those who may or may not benefit from the injustice. Are they able to see it? Do they care? Why should they?

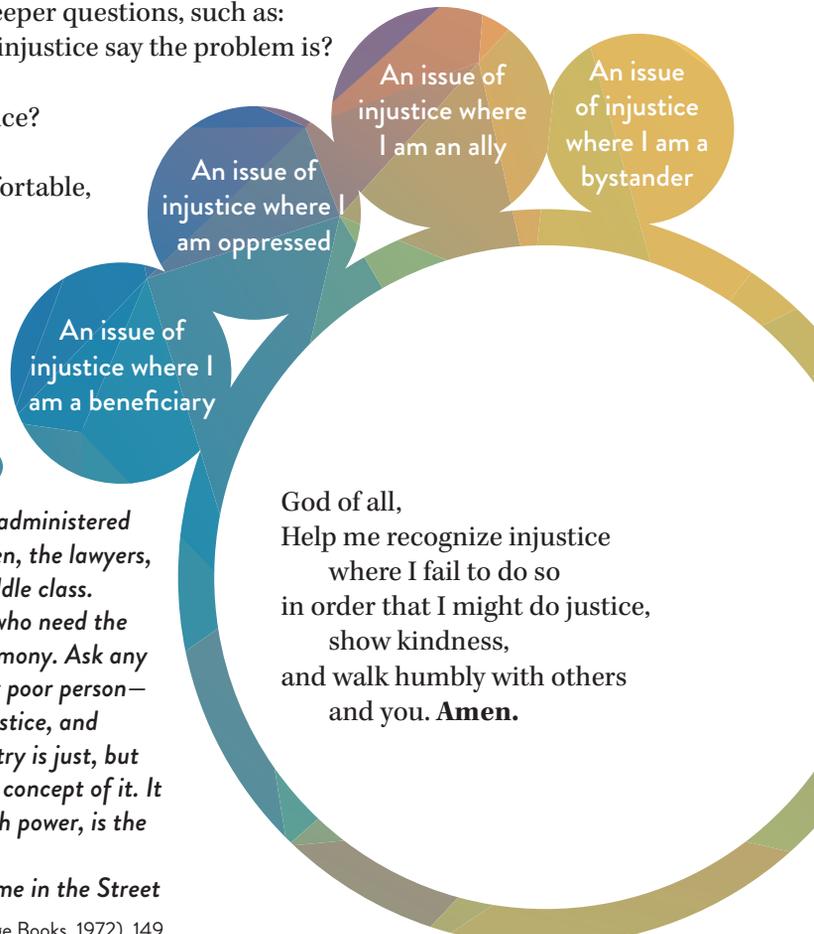
A foundational event that led to the establishment of the Jewish faith was the exodus. Hebrews who were suffering under the Egyptian economic system of slavery cried out repeatedly for help. God heard their cries and used humans and a few miracles to rescue them. They escaped to the desert and took forty years to create a community and the Jewish religion still alive today. Certainly, the enslaved Hebrews recognized the injustice to which they were submitted for years. Yet Pharaoh, the one most benefiting from this system, did not see what was wrong with a system where some were not free and could not reap the fruits of their labor.



And then there were the bystanders, the free Egyptian people, who may or may not have benefited from this system. Did they recognize the injustice being done to the Hebrews in their midst? How segregated was this society? Could they not hear the cries and moans? We can hope some helped alleviate the pain of the Hebrews. Did they have clothes drives and soup kitchens? Did some work with the Hebrews to achieve liberation? They do not figure much in the biblical story, but we are told they suffered dearly in the end, as their firstborn children were killed.

Recognizing injustice is not always so simple, yet there are some lessons learned through time that can help all of us ask deeper questions, such as:

- What do the people suffering the injustice say the problem is?
- Who is benefiting from the injustice?
- If the situation makes me uncomfortable, what is going on?
- How does the issue affect me?
- Do I benefit from it? How so?



Well, if one really wishes to know how Justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected—those, precisely, who need the law’s protection most!—and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person—ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.¹

—James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*

1. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 149.

God of all,
 Help me recognize injustice
 where I fail to do so
 in order that I might do justice,
 show kindness,
 and walk humbly with others
 and you. **Amen.**

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

As mentioned, the Jewish religion was composed initially of survivors of slavery. When we read the first five books in the Bible, called the *Torah*, the religion God created with them was heavily focused on fairness and *mishpat*, or justice. God continually tells them to remember that, just as they were once slaves in Egypt, so they should now protect and liberate others who are oppressed. They were to model a society where widows, orphans, and immigrants were all welcomed and protected, unlike most surrounding societies. In fact, God would judge them by their worship of God, which included how they took care of the weak, those without power. The early Christian community also consisted of survivors of injustice who were persecuted for practicing and preaching the radical love taught them by their executed leader, Jesus of Nazareth. They claimed he had risen from the dead and thus conquered the power of his unjust killing. This was the power of the resurrection. Evil never has the final word. God's love always wins.

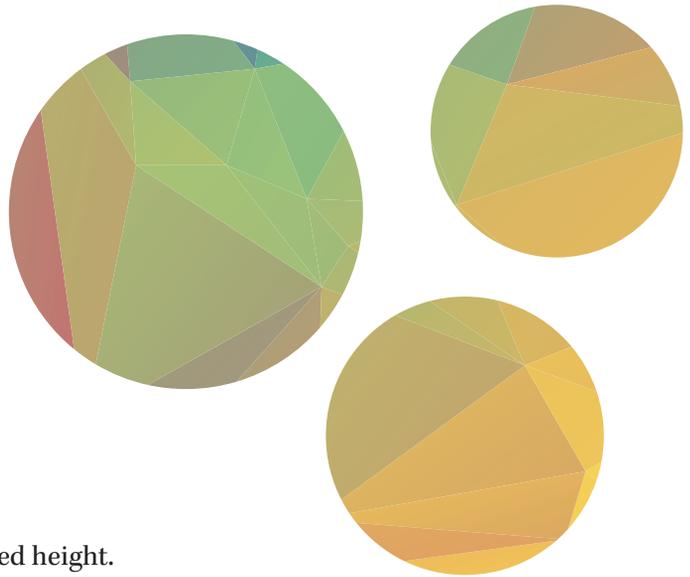
THE PROPHETS

Despite God's insistence on justice, as the Hebrew people formed their new nation and enjoyed a period of peace, many of their leaders failed to follow the *mishpat* so central to their identity. They began using their power in ways that benefited them personally and hurt others. Prophets arose to remind them of their past enslavement and denounce injustices creeping into their government and religion. Without mincing words, prophets risked their lives, and many suffered for speaking up. Here are just a couple of snippets of some writings where they recognized injustice and named it. Imagine someone posting this on Facebook today.

How the faithful city
has become a prostitute!
She that was full of justice,
righteousness lodged in her—
but now murderers!
Your silver has become dross;
your wine is mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.
—Isaiah 1:21–23



Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe;
its priests teach for a price;
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.”
Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the temple a wooded height.
—Micah 3:9–12



Prophets recognized injustice, called it out, and pronounced consequences on those in power who committed the harms. They also—almost always—promised that, after a period of punishment, God would forgive the people if they corrected the wrong.

JESUS RECOGNIZES DEEPER INJUSTICE

The account in the Gospel of John often titled “The Woman Caught in Adultery” might also be titled “Jesus Recognizes Deeper Injustice” (John 7:53–8:11). Jesus had just been with the disciples; the story begins when they left him and returned home.

Then each of them went home, while Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him, and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and, making her stand before all of them, they said to him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”

They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”



—John 7:53–8:11

The scribes and the Pharisees were indeed following the law as it was written. They knew the trap they were setting for Jesus. The law was clear. Women committing adultery were to be stoned to death as punishment. They were within their right to force the woman to stand in the public square and be humiliated and judged. And killed. Yet Jesus recognized the injustice of a system in the way it treated women.

Jesus did several things that caused everyone, even the accusers, to walk away. In a lecture on this text, preaching professor Anna Carter Florence called attention to Jesus' physical act of taking himself out of the way so that the scribes and the Pharisees had to look in the eye the woman they were willing to kill. Jesus knelt and scribbled on the ground before and after he spoke. Rather than flinging invectives at these religious leaders for their hypocrisy, Jesus invites them to see their own humanity and in doing so sheds light on the humanity of the whole community. "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7b). The cognitive dissonance of being willing to execute a woman for one sin while guilty of a multitude of sins themselves proves too much to bear, even for the Pharisees. One by one, they drop their stones and walk away.

As Jesus reveals their own hypocrisy to the religious leaders, he also reveals the walls, barriers, and rules that cover up the deeper meaning of the law, *mishpat*—justice. Recognizing injustice forces us to dig deeper than simple rules and take into context the wider system in which we live. Had Jesus been a strict rule follower and ignored the foundational value of *mishpat* and love, he could have just said, "Yup, guilty," and gone on his way. But he knew the patriarchal reality in which the woman, and everyone present, lived. Women were property of men and often were abused and mistreated with little or no legal recourse. Men, including the one who was the other half of the adulterous affair, were seldom held accountable when women were involved.

Imagine being present in that encounter between Jesus and the ones wanting to stone the woman. At what point would you have walked away?

Would you have stepped in?

What is a situation you know of where a deeper justice issue should be considered?

FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

From its beginning, the Christian community has had to deal with situations of injustice both inside and outside its walls. One of the early instances of this was recognizing the status of those who were not part of the original Jewish community that followed Jesus. As non-Jews (called Gentiles) joined the movement, a conflict arose as to whether or not the male converts should be required to practice circumcision, a Jewish religious practice (Acts 15). As we see through many of the books following the Gospels, there was much disagreement among leaders about the issue. Of course, the role of women was also an issue of injustice, which has still not been resolved for most of the Christian movement.

Another situation of injustice was that many of the new Christian members were poor. And so, sharing of resources was required of members, and there were punishments for those who did not (see Acts 4:32–5:11).

The advantage of working to recognize injustice in community is that more voices can be heard, especially those who experience injustice. The role of those who have power is to listen, believe stories of oppressed persons, and act. Following are some of the ways Christians have responded and work to continually recognize injustice.



EXTENDING FULL MEMBERSHIP

Only relatively recently have many predominantly white denominations in the US removed barriers to the full membership and ordination of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, and women. Most recently, some have fully recognized persons who are LGBTQ+ into both membership and ordination. This move requires recognizing the injustice that has been the status quo for most of history.

EXTENDING CHARITY TO INCLUDE JUSTICE

Christians are known for acts of unselfish love toward those in need. Charity is in our blood and what excites and draws many to our communities. Often it is through the relationships formed when working with people in need that deeper ministry is born.

Room in the Inn (www.roomintheinn.org) is an organization in Nashville, Tennessee, that centers its work on people who experience homelessness. The founder of the organization, Father Charles Strobel, first opened the doors of his church to people seeking sanctuary, and from that birthed Room in the Inn. He saw an immediate need within his community and—using the privilege and space of his church—he met that need.

Many issues lead to homelessness, including incarceration, addiction, lack of affordable housing, racism, and homophobia. Room in the Inn was always more than a homeless shelter. The organization is really a space of empowerment that equips people to overcome these systems. Empowering participants with resources for recovery, education, housing, and a vast network of outreach work, this organization meets immediate and long-term needs of people.



REGULAR GATHERING ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Related to the last point, one of the best ways to recognize injustice is to regularly gather with people who experience injustice. Forming a safe environment where all are heard and relationships can be built over time can lead to transformative experiences and communities.

- Many churches have moved from inviting immigrant churches to *nest* in their building to regularly worshipping together. Some have merged their governing boards as well, sharing ownership of the building.
- Other churches have long-term relationships with churches across town and provide ways for members of both churches to regularly worship and do mission together.
- Some communities form groups where leaders can gather and discuss issues, particularly ones that are harming churches. Empower West in Louisville, Kentucky, is a group of clergy from the predominantly Black and lower-income part of town and clergy from the predominantly white East end of the city. Through regular Monday lunch meetings, the group hears stories of injustice and mobilizes members to act.

MISSION TRIPS THAT GO DEEPER

Many young people go on church mission trips during their middle- and high-school years. Through seeing situations of poverty and injustice, some young people ask themselves, why is the world like this? And they want to go deeper.

The Young Adult Volunteer Program (bit.ly/FMYAV) began for this very reason, to offer young people a year of service so that they may be changed through gaining knowledge of systems of injustice underlying the needs of the people they serve. The program offers placements in a multitude of different contexts that encompass a variety of issues, such as immigration, housing insecurity, poverty, climate change, and advocacy.

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

Recognizing injustice requires widening our gaze to become aware of deeper structural realities. It also pushes us to extend charitable actions when the needs the actions address arise from injustice. Providing snacks for hungry children is an important ministry, but at the same time we must ask why some children in our community are hungry in the first place, while others play with their food and toss out leftovers. While we celebrate our church's mission work of building houses for unhoused neighbors, we must ask why some own houses while so many live with insecurity about housing. Discovering the answers to those questions will make some uncomfortable. Doing justice is making the choice to lean into that discomfort and strive for a better world, refusing to tune out the uncomfortable parts of reality and our own complicity in unjust systems.

KEEP A PRAYER LIST

We learn about people who experience injustice daily. Consider keeping a list, perhaps in a notebook, where you jot down names and situations to pray for. During your time of prayer, spend a moment reading the list. Periodically, begin a new list.

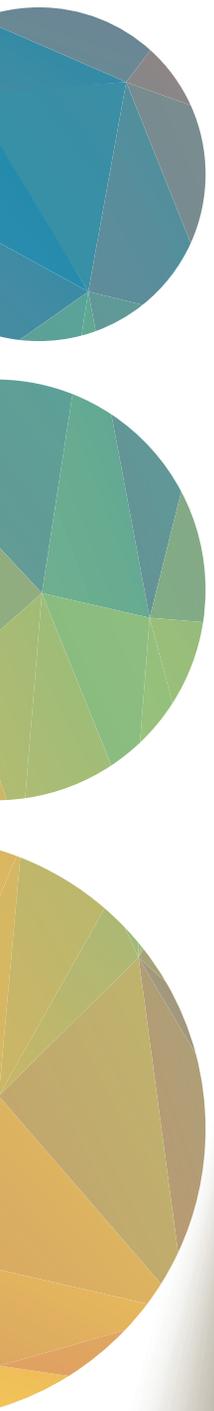
CONFESS

Historically, Roman Catholic worship begins with a prayer called the *Confiteor* that is a confession by the worshiper that they have sinned in what they have done and in what they have failed to do. In Protestant worship, this expression happens in prayers of confession where we confess sins of commission (ways we have acted unjustly) and sins of omission (situations where we have failed to act). When done sincerely, this regular act of confession opens our hearts to consider ways we participate in injustice.

- What are some ways you participate in injustice?

- What are some ways you have failed to act in situations of injustice?





KEEP LEARNING

Many more resources are available now than ever before, written or produced by oppressed persons themselves. Make time in your life to continually learn what people are saying about their justice claims. Make sure you are learning from groups who experience discrimination and be careful of resources from dominant groups trying to speak for others.

- Museums. Visit a museum created by survivors of the Holocaust, Native American museums, African American museums, and so forth.
- Books. Read books, articles, and websites by those who write about their own experiences. A collection of firsthand accounts of slavery in the US can be found in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C. A digital collection of more than 9,500 images and stories may be found online at bit.ly/FMSlaveNarratives.
- Public television history and documentaries. PBS has a wealth of excellent shows on various forms of discrimination in this country.
- Podcasts such as CodeSwitch focus on racial justice.

Don't get overwhelmed, but make a short-term and long-term plan to educate yourself about history, current events, and how those events create injustice.

- ➔ What is one way you will learn more about a situation of injustice?

DEEPEN CHARITY WORK

If you are involved in a charitable ministry, gather with others willing to discuss issues of injustice that produce the need and potential ways you can address that.

- How do we know this is a priority need of the community? That is, how have the recipients expressed their needs?
- What are the causes of this need?
- What is happening to address the cause and how does/can your community participate?
- How are recipients involved in the leadership of the program?

REFLECT

Spend some time thinking about a justice issue you are aware of, even if you don't know all the facts about it. It can be an internal justice issue in your household or community or church.

- What is the issue of justice?
- What do people impacted by the injustice say about what needs to happen?
- What more do you need to know about the issue?
- How will you find out?

FOLLOWING JESUS

Unfairly distributed power can lead to injustice. Recognizing injustice is often not as simple as it seems. Just as he did with the woman caught in adultery, Jesus always considered deeper issues of power and powerlessness.

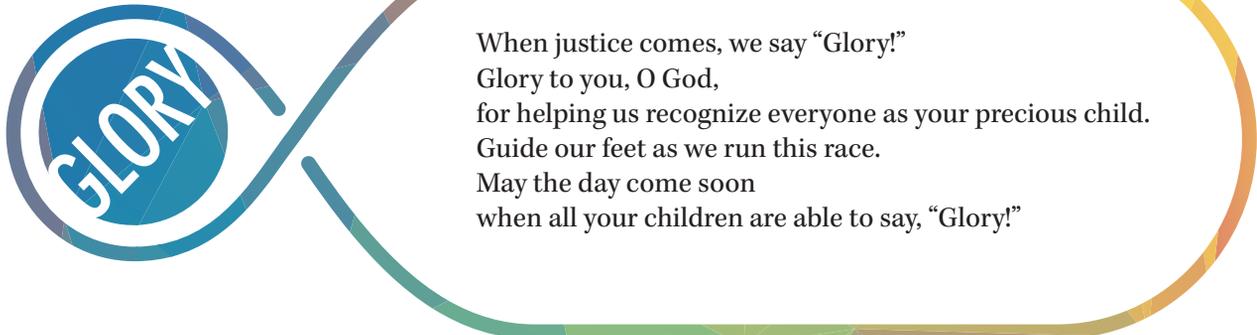
We humans are great at adapting to situations of injustice. When it goes on for a long time, perhaps it is natural to become a bit numb. Even people who experience injustice can sometimes begin to believe cultural messages that things are as they should be: “It’s always been this way.” In this sense, Jesus was a great model of stirring things up. He helped people see deeper injustices and not be content with status quo judgments.

There have been and will always be situations of injustice. Therefore, Christians must continually develop our ability to understand it, to go deep, and to find ways to act.



SEEN INJUSTICE

“Glory” is a song by American singer John Legend and American rapper Common. It was the theme song for the 2014 movie *Selma*, which is about the 1965 Selma-to-Montgomery civil rights march. Read the lyrics found at bit.ly/FMGloryLyrics and listen to the YouTube video “Common, John Legend—Glory” (bit.ly/FMGlory, 3:08).



When justice comes, we say “Glory!”
Glory to you, O God,
for helping us recognize everyone as your precious child.
Guide our feet as we run this race.
May the day come soon
when all your children are able to say, “Glory!”