

# **Social Justice and the Teachings of the Bible**

**An Essay**

**Written by**

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The logo for Silver Arts, featuring the words "Silver Arts" in a cursive, handwritten-style font. The word "Silver" is written in a dark grey color, and "Arts" is written in a lighter, greyish-blue color. The letters are fluid and connected, with a horizontal line striking through the middle of the text.

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## **Social Justice and the Teachings of the Bible**

*"Unrolling the Scroll, He found the place where it is written: The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captive and release from darkness for the prisoner." (Luke 4:17-18)*

**These are the words Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth when he announced the beginning of his ministry. He identified himself as the "Servant of the Lord; prophesied by Isaiah, who would "bring justice" to the world (Isaiah 42:1-7). Most people know that Jesus came to bring forgiveness and grace. Less well known is the Biblical teaching that a true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek Justice in the world.**

**It is commonly thought in secular society that the Bible is one of the greatest hindrances to doing justice. Isn't it full of regressive views? Didn't it condone slavery? Why would we look to the Bible for guidance on how to have a more just society? In his extensive Biblical research and writings Timothy Keller, pastor of New York City's Redeemer Presbyterian Church, challenges**

**these preconceived beliefs and presents the Bible as a fundamental source for promoting justice and compassion for those in need. He explores a life of justice empowered by an experience of grace. He offers each of us a new understanding of modern justice and human rights that will resonate with both the faithful and the skeptical.**

**There is a host of young Christian believers today who respond with joy to the call to care for the needy. Volunteerism is a distinguishing mark of an entire generation of American college students and recent graduates. This generation of teens and young adults are much more interested in service than has been true of previous generations. Volunteering rates among young adults dropped of significantly in the 1970's and 1980's. Current youngsters grew up in schools that were more likely to have service learning programs . . . starting young people on a path of community service much earlier than before. Even School support groups like alumni have begun to put stress on community service. In 2012 Corinth Holders High School in Johnston County, a large group of Alumni from the former Corinth-Holders High School started and very generously supports a college scholarship based on the recipient's community service.**

**These young adults are imbued by their youth culture not only with an emotional resonance for social justice, but a consumerism that undermines self-denial and delayed gratification. While many young adults have a Christian faith, and also a desire to help people in need, these two things are not actually connected to each other in their lives. They have not thought out the implications of Jesus's gospel for doing justice in all aspects of life.**

**In the twentieth century the American church divided between the liberal mainline that stressed social justice and the fundamentalist churches that emphasized personal salvation. One of the founders of the social gospel movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German Baptist minister whose first pastorate was on the edge of New York City's Hell's Kitchen in the 1880's. His firsthand acquaintance with the terrible poverty of his neighborhood led him to question traditional evangelism, which took pains to save people's souls but did nothing about the social system locking them into poverty. Rauschenbusch began to minister to "both soul and body," but in tandem with his shift in method came a shift in theology. In the mindset of many orthodox**

**Christians, therefore, “doing justice” is inextricably linked with loss of sound doctrine and spiritual dynamism.**

**However, Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth century author of the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” was a staunch Calvinist and hardly anyone’s idea of a “liberal”. Yet in his discourse on “The Duty of Charity to the Poor,” he concluded, “Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving the poor? Unlike Rauschenbusch, Edwards argued that you did not have to change the classic Biblical doctrine of salvation to do ministry to the poor. On the contrary, such ministry flows directly out of historic evangelical teaching. He saw involvement with the poor and classic Biblical doctrine as indissolubly intertwined. When the Spirit enables us to understand what Christ has done for us, the result is a life poured out in deeds of justice and compassion for the poor.**

**I was reared by Christian parents who believed in treating all people with dignity and respect regardless of their race, creed, or financial status and they imbued me with those same beliefs. When I entered college in the 1960’s I became part of a generation**

**of students transfixed by the Civil Rights Movement. I learned about the systematic violence that was being carried out against blacks and civil rights workers in our country. I was amazed that something as unjust as segregation could have been so easily rationalized by the entire society. I learned that the problem was not just a “few troublemakers.” Black people did have a right to demand the redress and rectifying of many wrongs. I began to wonder why many folks seemingly outside the church thoughtfully embraced and supported the Civil Rights Movement while the orthodox Christian believers thought that Martin Luther King, Jr., was a threat to our society. I did find that there were some Christian believers who were integrating their faith with every kind of justice in society. Through much study and prayer I came to realize that in fact the Bible provides the very basis for justice and that Biblical prophetic literature rang with calls for justice. I also discovered that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s that I so admired was grounded much more in the African-American church’s Christian views of sin and salvation than in secularism.**

**Proverbs 19:17 and 14:31 are texts that sum up a great deal of Scriptural material. The first text says that if you are kind to**

**the poor, God takes it as if you are being kind to Him. The second gives us the flip side: namely, that if you show contempt for the poor it means you are showing contempt for Him. But there is a deeper principle at work here. If you insult the poor, you insult God. The principle is God personally identifies very closely with the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant, the most powerless and vulnerable members of society. When the Old Testament says God identifies with the poor that is a strong statement. But it still is basically a figure of speech. Not until you come to the New Testament can you fully grasp the degree to which God has done this.**

**In Proverbs we see God identify with the poor symbolically. But in the incarnation and death of Jesus we see God identify with the poor and marginal literally. Jesus was born in a stable and his bed was the animal's feed trough. When his parents had him circumcised the offering made – two pigeons – was that prescribed for the poorest class of people in the society. He lived among the poor and marginalized, who were drawn to Him even as the respectable were repulsed by Him. We see the kind of life He lived when He said, "Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). At the end of His**

**life He rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, spent His last evening in a borrowed room, and when He died He was laid in a borrowed tomb. They cast lots for His only possession, His robe, for there on the cross He was stripped of everything. He died naked and penniless. He had little the world valued and the little He had was taken. He was discarded – thrown away. But only because of Him we have hope.**

**Many people say, “I can’t believe in God when I see all the injustice in the world.” But here is Jesus, the Son of God, who knows what it’s like to be the victim of injustice, to stand up to power, to face a corrupt system and be killed for it. He knows what it is like to be lynched. I could never myself believe in a God if it were not for the Cross. In the real world of pain, how could anyone worship a God who was immuned to it? Remember Matthew 25. On the last day Jesus sits on the judgment seat saying:**

*“For I was hungry and you gave Me food, I was thirsty and you gave Me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed Me, I was naked and you clothed Me, I was sick and you visited Me, I was in prison and you came to Me..”*

*“Then the righteous will answer Him, saying “Lord, when did we see You hungry an feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger and welcome You or naked and clothed You? And when did we see You sick or in prison and visited you?”*



And the King will answer them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers, you did it to Me."  
(Matthew 25: 35-40)

**Resources:**

**Various Christian writings by Edwards, Keller, Rauschenbusch, and others plus many Scripture References from the Bible.**