

# Voices: Justice is making sure Black lives matter

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.*

*You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudice. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.*

*[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.*

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Three hundred years ago, in what would become America, it was not a crime to kill a slave who was undergoing "correction." Black lives didn't matter.

One hundred years ago, lynching—another name for premeditated conspiracy to murder—rarely was prosecuted, and in those few instances where it was, acquittal essentially was guaranteed. Black lives didn't matter.

Sixty years ago, members of the Ku Klux Klan could kidnap, torture or murder civil rights activists, or even innocent individuals like the four little girls of the 16th Avenue Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., sometimes with the complicity of local law enforcement officials. There was scant

concern of prosecution or conviction. That a few murderers were convicted in later years does not alter the fact that terrorizing African Americans and their allies was a low-risk crime. Black lives didn't matter.

And let's not forget that since 1619, when the first Africans were traded as commodities, and carrying through to the 1950s, rape of Black women seldom was punished, notwithstanding overwhelming evidence of the crime. Indeed, sexual assault of Black women seemingly was accepted. The 1944 case of Recy Taylor, gang-raped by six white men who never were prosecuted, is just one case in point. At the same time, Black men could be lynched and Black communities destroyed at the mere suggestion of sexual impropriety involving a white woman. Black women's lives didn't matter.

## **Then and now**

Today one need only list the names recently in the news and reflect objectively on the justice system's response to the various incidents to begin to understand why the Black Lives Matter movement resonates in the African American community.

Ahmaud Arbery's life mattered little to the three white men who are charged with murdering him. Their bias against Black people led them to believe Arbery to be a burglary suspect, and that was justification enough for them to dispense their vigilante "justice." That Arbery was unarmed and seemingly engaged in nothing more than an afternoon jog initially sparked no arrests or even a thorough investigation by the original district attorney who reviewed the case. Arbery's life didn't matter.

Trayvon Martin's life mattered little to George Zimmerman, who shot the 17-year-old who was walking home after purchasing a snack and a soft drink. Nor did it matter much to the jury that acquitted Zimmerman. Pursuant to Florida's "stand your ground" legislation, Zimmerman was not required to retreat from the unarmed child he assaulted; he could use

deadly force, even though he instigated the altercation with the teenager. Trayvon Martin had no right to stand his ground; his life didn't matter.

George Floyd's life seemingly mattered little to Derek Chauvin, the police officer seen kneeling on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes, his hands nonchalantly stuffed in his pockets as Floyd's life seeped from his body. Nor did it seemingly matter to the other three officers on the scene who did little to protect Floyd.

## **As for me**

Raised by Christian parents and educated in parochial school, I learned we are wonderfully made in the image of God. I was taught we all are children of God.

As a lawyer, I firmly believe in the directive of Micah 6:8, that we all are called to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God.

So, what does justice look like to me? It does not mean ignoring differences. It does, however, mean being ever sensitive to implicit biases that too often blind us to the insignificance of those differences based on race or skin color.

Just as importantly, justice looks like acknowledging explicit racism and addressing it, rather than deflecting to other issues to excuse the problem. For example, Black-on-Black crime is an issue, but it diminishes in no way that police brutality disproportionately affects African Americans, or that statistics show Blacks are more likely than whites to be arrested for suspicion of the same crime and are more likely to be given harsher sentences if convicted as compared to whites.

Justice means really and truly leaning in to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream that we judge a man by the content of his character rather than the

color of his skin. The closer we come to doing that, the more we can boldly and proudly proclaim a just society in which all lives really do matter.

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