

Voices: What justice looks like in the New Testament

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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.

Justice is universal, personal and contextual all at the same time. By contextual here, I mean "Baptist." For Baptists to ask what justice looks like requires "looking to Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2).

Justice looks like treating every person as you would treat Jesus. It moves beyond cosmetic niceness and providing hospitality for the worthy poor. The King of kings takes the place of the poor and unwanted and frames Christian views of justice.

Jesus' last teaching (Matthew 25:40-46) before the passion story (Matthew 26:1-27:66) defines justice as radical hospitality. It moves beyond a sense of hospitality for the worthy.

The most compelling metric for justice remains how we have treated the least of these (Matthew 25:45). Our position on mass incarceration looks different if we picture Jesus in prison. Our position on immigration looks different if we see Jesus as a migrant. Our position on women looks different if we see Jesus as a woman.

Jesus does not soften the blow for those who miss this metric (Matthew 25:46). Jesus makes clear the Christian community is moving into a time of reckoning (Matthew 25:31-39).

Justice looks like the good Samaritan

I often hear preached the story of the good Samaritan (Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-37). It is part of nice people's gospel.

A young lawyer comes to test Jesus with a trick question, "What must I do?" In some ways, the lawyer asks, "What do justice and salvation look like?"

Jesus provides an orthodox response drawn from the Scriptures of the Jewish people: Love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and neighbor (Leviticus 19:17-18).

The lawyer presses Jesus with the question, "Who is my neighbor?"—a question that challenges Christians still today.

Jesus responds with a story about a survivor of a violent crime. Three characters have the opportunity for justice and love. Only one responds correctly.

The preacher then segues into, "Go, and do likewise." By that the preacher means, "Extend generous hospitality to the survivors of violence." Such a sermon overlooks how Jesus transgresses social norms.

We like to think, "Do what the Samaritan did." Jesus, rather, asks the

believer to *be* a Samaritan.

When Jesus, through his work on the cross, becomes despised for our salvation, he defines justice. It is more than generosity; it is an act of relinquishing privilege.

Justice looks like Simon of Cyrene

Justice looks like a character we often ignore. Simon, who carried the cross of Christ, was from Cyrene in northern Africa in what today is eastern Libya. He was not a Samaritan, but he carried the cross of Christ (Matthew 27:32).

Simon of Cyrene was played by two well-regarded actors—Paul Robeson in the play *Simon the Cyrenian* (1920) and by Sidney Portier in the movie *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). The playwright Ridgely Torrence and the filmmaker George Stevens wanted to invite viewers to imagine an African presence in early Christianity. Their selection of Robeson and Portier, respectively, indicates their attempt to make the acceptance of an African presence in early Christianity more acceptable.

The good Samaritan and Simon of Cyrene both gesture to a justice rooted in the cross of Christ. The theologian James Cone in his book *Cross and the Lynching Tree* makes clear the connections between the spectacle of lynching in the United States and the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross was the lynching tree of Jesus.

Justice looks like choosing the lynching tree

The thousands of women, children and men lynched did not choose their fate. The purpose of the spectacle of lynching was to imprint into the

imagination of the community the power of the empire in the time of Jesus and the power of white supremacy in the America of the 19th and 20th centuries.

But even in the festival of blood that constitutes a lynching, God can make a testimony of justice on the horizon. When Jesus says to his disciples, "Take up your cross and follow me, (Matthew 16:24) his invitation is to the lynching tree.

Justice looks like treating every person as if that person was Jesus. That kind of radical hospitality likely leads a Christian to a lynching tree. The world thinks justice leads to progress and niceness.

Instead of niceness and progress, Christians and Baptists hope for resurrection and God's redemption of the universe.

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NOTE: The paragraph about casting Simon of Cyrene in a play and movie was added after publication.

[Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.