



WHY JUSTICE? WHY ME?

*The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who
will have sought and found how to serve.*

—Albert Schweitzer

☞ Time stops against the cold frame of the X-ray machine. “Can you turn a little to your left?” Fatigue fumbles the simple directions. My mind wanders with the machine’s noises.

Click—recent engagement.

Clack—good friends.

Click—college graduation.

Clack—new job.

But something sits deep in my soul. I don’t want to stand still long enough to find out what it is. As doctors examine my chest X-rays against the light board, I review frames of my new life against the light of reason. I hear a puzzled voice across the room, “Inconclusive.” My thoughts exactly.

The light fades to dark again for a few years. The 60-to-80-hour work weeks blanket my brain in a deep fog. Questions fall silent as chronic physical pain shouts more loudly.

Flashes of insight bounce off my husband’s insistence that I stop this pace; I obsessively need to keep moving. He sees destruction to my body; I see disintegrating emotional connection in my marriage.

After another bad spell, I resign to spend the next several months in bed. As I grow sicker, medical science fails me, and more time passes to revolve those pictures in my mind. They don’t add up.

Click, clack, click, clack.

Still inconclusive.

Then other images find their way into the slideshow.

Click—growing up among the working rural poor.

Clack—studying and writing on politics in high school.

Click—participating in an inner-city internship in college. Facing complex struggles with practical training. That’s me with the crazy hair.

Clack—mentoring teen girls in my early adult years.

Click—writing and supporting an African child through Compassion International, watching her life transform through the photographs and letters we exchanged.

These disjointed shapes danced in living color, sharply focused, unfading despite my best efforts. What did they have to do with me with me now? That service stuff was what all the young people did to “change the world.” I have a different life now with responsibilities and very little free time. Let somebody else take care of it.

But after months of the unwieldy slide show in my head, I caved. Fighting my doubts, I began something deeper than a token contribution or holiday project. I dug into the one small thing I was already doing—caring about children who live in poverty. I became a child advocate with Compassion International and started finding sponsors for other waiting children. I agreed, despite physical pain, to work sign-up tables at sponsorship events.

God supplied amazing stamina that allowed me to get through those late-night events. I took my training more seriously and searched to find better, clearer answers to the questions potential sponsors asked. Lying flat on my back in bed, I prayed more earnestly for my sponsored child and for the charity’s worldwide request lists. Right away crazy things began to happen.

First, I had the strength the instant I needed it. Second, residual energy washed over the rest of my life. Tasks like laundry, cleaning, and teaching were getting done faster with less pain.

My life didn’t fall apart as I expected, and time seemed to multiply. We found new medical treatment from natural therapies that actually helped. On the other hand, I faced spiritual opposition

with unexpected force. Wild craziness broke loose in every area of my life from relationships to circumstantial events. I needed to depend on something greater than myself to get things done. Miss Independent now needed the help of others and their prayers.

But this dependence wasn't all bad, as I found comfort and support in this new experiment unlike what I had experienced before. I was still ill enough that any service would have to fit in with my regular activities—doing chores, going shopping, conducting business—with the people in my everyday life. Was there really a way to make this work for the long term? I needed to try.

Around this time friends started asking questions. We were well past youthful idealism, buying homes, starting families, and putting down roots. “What does justice have to do with us? What happens when we see tragedy in the media but don't know what to do as life moves on? How do we start? Is this just for others or for me too?”

I did not have the answers, but I could research creative ways to live justice as a mom, consumer, or businesswoman—things I was already searching for. I started meeting others who were already doing this—women who were changing their lifestyles to find their *one* thing.

These weren't women with spare time; they were women who were dealing with their own extreme life circumstances. Despite this, they were serving with deep, lasting joy that was contagious. They didn't have hero or saint complexes; they were just using their hobbies, purchases, and lives in a more focused way.

A decade has passed since the chest X-ray. Life is now going full-speed ahead and is busier than ever, like a never-ending video stream. What does your video stream look like? What are your unique challenges? Why add justice to life's load? Surprisingly, aiding those in need is not the heavy load that breaks a back; rather, it is engine fuel to live in the “ordinary” with clarity, order, peace, and joy.

You Mean Help the Poor, Right?

The panhandler is one of the visible faces of poverty. Can we find better ways to help him or her? The starving African child is

another haunting reminder. Are there better ways to engage him or her? What do we really know about the people behind these often-exploited images?

Who are the poor? Where do they live? I was surprised to learn that in the United States the fastest growing segment of those living in poverty are in the suburbs (38.5 percent). Our imaginations take us down dark alleys where we hear gunshots, but only six percent of the poor live in an urban ghetto. One third of the poor are married and work full time. Thirteen million children live in poverty.¹

Why don't we see them? Maybe we're too busy and just don't notice. Maybe they don't get the same media attention that violent crime victims or natural disaster survivors receive.

Global poverty is much more severe than poverty in the United States. The current world food supply is already strained in these fragile economic conditions. What we view through media screens feels as if it's fiction in faraway places, but the tragedy overseas is very real.

There are many types of poverty that include economic, health, environmental, social, educational, and spiritual.² When I discuss poverty in this book, I refer to the types or combinations of types that have a physical manifestation. For example, a wealthy American may be spiritually poor but show no outward sign of his or her need. A different person may suffer economic poverty and also have spiritual and health needs. While the wealthy person's need is real, he or she is not suffering injustice, because he or she has access to spiritual and economic resources, but the physically poor person does not have the same resources. When we understand that poverty takes these different forms, we can see that creative, diverse solutions are needed. One remedy does not cure all ailments.

Who Needs Justice?

Those who need justice are often invisible, because the voices of the marginalized in our culture are rarely heard. Look at the fol-

lowing list. There are many groups of people who need our help both in the United States and overseas.

Domestic	Global
Domestic Violence Sex Trafficking	Domestic Violence Sex Trafficking
Orphans/Foster Care Widows/Single Moms Teen Moms/Unborn Children Neglected/Abused Children Child Abuse	Orphans/Orphanages Widows/Single Moms Teen Moms/Unborn Children Neglected/Abused Children Prenatal Care/Parent Training
Hunger Food Banks/Shelters Homelessness	Hunger World Food Shortage Homelessness Clean Water Access
Prisoners/Families Military Families/Veterans Racial/Ethnic Justice	Martyrs—Imprisoned for Faith Religious/Political freedom Racial/Ethnic Justice Basic Human Rights
Medical Care Illness Homebound/Caregivers Special-needs Families Elderly	Medical Care Illness (Malaria/AIDS) Homebound/Caregivers Special-needs Families Elderly
Disaster Relief Environmental Concerns	Disaster Relief Environmental Concerns Clean Water/Sanitation
Working Poor Livable Wage Literacy/Education Joblessness Human Trafficking	Working Poor Work Conditions Literacy/Education Joblessness Human Trafficking

You may already be helping in some of these areas. Maybe you donate to a local food pantry or participate in special giving during holidays. Do you buy produce that's grown locally or fair trade items? If you do any of these, you're living justice every day. But there's still work to be done.

Why Is Justice Important?

What's the big deal after all?

My friend Jo comes to mind. Jo has many attributes. She's fun to be with, joyful, and thoughtful. In fact, it is not easy to separate those inner qualities from my perception of her.

In the same way God has many attributes. He often seems far away because I can't see His face, but I can know His attributes: holiness, love, mercy, grace, and truth. Sometimes it's hard to remember to include justice in that list.

We speak with our lips what's on our hearts. Jo speaks most about family, friends, spiritual things, and photography. Everyone who spends time with her knows that these are the things that are important to her. When God speaks to us through His Word, it seems fair to say that He speaks about what matters to Him.

How many times in Scripture do you think justice issues are mentioned? Ten? One hundred? One thousand? Tony Hall, former United States Ambassador for Humanitarian Issues, says there are more than 2,500 verses in the Bible about justice issues.³ See the Appendix for a list of some of the key passages.

Not only is justice a part of God's character—it's a central issue repeated more than 2,500 times. If justice is a key attribute of the God we serve, it should be a key attribute of His servants. Is it rare to hear these issues spoken about in mainstream Christian circles, in everyday conversations with friends and family? Why is that? Maybe it's the connotation of the word "justice." Sometimes when I say "justice," people hear "fanatical socialism." You may think of the term "social justice" in this context.

Social Justice or Kingdom Justice?

What is social justice? Social justice is "the distribution of advantages and disadvantages within a society."⁴ Others have told

me that the term “social justice” brings up images of government programs such as unemployment, welfare, and Social Security. I’m interested in a different society, a different kingdom. I’m interested in an upside-down kingdom. When the terms “justice” or “social justice” are used in these pages, I mean “Kingdom justice.”

Society says to claw your way to the top.

Kingdom justice says, “The last shall be first.”

Society says to take care of yourself and your family first. If you have anything left, you can give that away.

Kingdom justice seeks first God’s agenda and then trusts that all the other stuff will work out.

Society glorifies the wealthy, the brilliant, the famous, the well-bred. Use those connections to win.

Kingdom justice humbles itself to aid those who are oppressed.

Social justice follows the whims of a fickle crowd.

Kingdom justice is an age-old wisdom, never-changing, ever-constant, until one day the Author of justice will return, and every wrong will be righted.

Why Me?

“Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too” (Frederick Buechner).

Many women have asked, “Why me? I write my contribution check. Isn’t that enough?” Those questions rattle inside me as well. Each one of us has a different answer to that kind of question, but here are some basic reasons we must do more.

I Will Recognize Jesus

Ask any Midwesterner about the weather in late winter and, he or she will tell you it’s enough to make you bonkers. Our landscape from Valentine’s Day to Easter is painted with brown-grey mush mixed with enough sunshine to torment you with scenes from far-away summer. Right around Easter we regain hope. Reluctant living things rise up out of the dead earth. Miracles linger in every bud and bloom. I find myself inspecting every branch and blade of

grass. When trees leaf in May, we breathe a sigh of relief—finally. But find me in July with an abundance of green things around me, and I won’t even notice the trees. They’re still changing and growing, but I’m unaware.

In the same way, the bleak backdrop of poverty and injustice sets the stage that best contrasts God’s work. I see and recognize Jesus most in the miraculous resurrection of lives once dismantled.

When asked if He was legitimate, Jesus cited only two items from His résumé. Sick are healed. Good news is preached to the poor (Matthew 11:5-6). When others were thinking, *He doesn’t look or act like God*, Jesus was pointing out the new life, the growth in the darkest places.

If we don’t interact with the poor, it’s too easy to skip over the 2,500 verses, walk past the needy, and skim over Jesus himself.

Jesus Will Recognize Me

What is good activity? Time spent in prayer, church activities, or working on my vices? Those may be worthwhile, but notice what makes Jesus’ top six list. In Matthew 25 Jesus forecasts the future. He has the nations gathered before Him. We’re all claiming to be His, but He knows better. He separates true followers from the crowd. How? Jesus gives a list that’s repeated three times: those who feed the hungry, give water to the parched, clothe the naked, shelter the stranger, nurse the sick, and visit the prisoner. Even as one who advocates for poor children, this list surprises me in its focus on justice. I still don’t fully understand how important it is, but I want more than anything for Jesus to recognize me as His.

They Belong to My Family

I had just finished a physical therapy session. I needed to get home and had one last errand to do. On the way there, I saw a woman in distress on the side of the road. A line I had recently read reminded me not to “turn away from your own flesh and blood” (Isaiah 58:7).

I was beginning to groan silently to myself, *I just want to go home*. I drove away but turned around and came back, because I knew I wouldn’t drive away if that were my child, sister, cousin, or mother

on the road. I would have stopped. Why? *Family*. We do stuff for family that we wouldn't do for anyone else.

Something in me resists connecting to a destitute woman. I don't know why that is, because I understand that Jesus considers me a close family member of His, even though I don't deserve that. In the same way, those who are marginalized by society may not "deserve" family status. A complete stranger can be part of us—part of our family—because he or she is a human being, our flesh and blood.

Imagine for a moment that your daughter is part of the sex-trafficking business. Imagine that your son is starving to death because of poor nutrition. Imagine your elderly mother dying because of the lack of basic sanitation.

Can you visualize not helping? Me neither.

Ketchup and Mustard—Deanna's Story

Our church paper announced weekly opportunities to serve Sunday supper at the local mission. After seeing that insert for a year, I knew what I wanted to do for my 50th birthday. My husband, Jeff, and our three children came along to commemorate the day.

The first Sunday we served I kept busy, too uncomfortable to talk with the men. My daughter, Natalie, and I served desserts. Jeff and our sons, Thomas and Matthew, served from behind the counter. The men were thankful and gracious. Thomas got back to the car and stated, "I want to come back next week."

That's how our service to others began. My family and I stretched ourselves to form relationships with the men in the recovery program. We looked forward to seeing them and hearing about their concerns. I started carrying a little piece of paper and a pen in my pocket to help me remember what to pray for them. Natalie began helping one man memorize his required Bible verses. He knew he would get trouble from her if he didn't toe the line!

One Sunday we had plenty of volunteers, so I told the kitchen leader, “I’m going upstairs to the chapel.”

She said, “Wait. I’ve got a job for you.”

She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with ketchup and mustard bottles. She then asked me to stand behind a table and hand out condiments, even though they didn’t seem to garnish that particular meal. *What a waste of my time! Come on, Lord—mustard and ketchup? I want something useful to do. I’d be more helpful upstairs playing games!*

As I stood there, I watched the men eat. With their heads bowed over their trays, mechanically spooning food into their mouths, they avoided eye contact. I could see desperation etched deeply into their faces—the desperation that prompts a grown man to stand in line for free food. When I stopped busying myself by being “useful,” I saw their brokenness—and my own.

I’m encouraged by the men who have nothing yet still report what the Lord has done for them. They’re hungry for relationships and for people in their lives who care enough to remember their names. When one has lost everything, those small things become a lifeline to survival.

On our first Sunday there—my 50th birthday—the leader mentioned that the mission house itself is a common structure, but it *transforms* into a sacred space because Jesus is there. I finally understand what she meant.

Character traits that often elude us are found in abundance among the poor. Those without physical means cultivate love, patience, kindness, and joy in the soil of hard circumstance. I operate under the illusion that *my* hard work puts food on the table, and I forget about the creator and sustainer of the heartbeat in my chest. How many others have helped me out along the way? Identifying with the weak is crucial to spiritual life. They may start as “one of those people” but they soon become “one of us.” Our own social, spiritual, and emotional poverty becomes evident only through interaction with the needy.

To see Christ.

To be identified as His.
To help my own flesh and blood
To identify with the weak.
And—to enjoy the rewards.

Limitless Benefits

Bottom line—you have more to gain than to lose.

- Blessing in work (Deuteronomy 15:10)
- Provision in hard times (Proverbs 28:27; Isaiah 58:11)
- Strength (Isaiah 58:11)
- Treasure in heaven (Luke 12:33)
- Impartiality (James 2:2-6)
- Blessings on family (Acts 10:4)
- Healing (Isaiah 58:8)
- Protection (Isaiah 58:8)
- Honor (Psalm 112:9)
- Joy (Isaiah 58:14)

Isaiah 58:14 says, “Then you will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob. The mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Joy—it’s the most fulfilling part of my life in identifying with the poor. But what if you aren’t feeling joyful right now?

Click—heavy guilt.

Clack—wasted time

Click—missed opportunities.

Embrace God’s grace, new mercies to start this day fresh, and strength to walk differently today.

“Let the past sleep, but let it sleep on the bosom of Christ, and go out into the irresistible future with Him” (Oswald Chambers).

REFLECT

1. Have you had a *real-life* encounter with injustice? If so, what?
2. What's the difference between poverty and justice?
3. What one new thing did you learn about the words "poverty" and "justice"?
4. How is Kingdom justice different than social justice?
5. Name some groups of people who need justice. You can refer to the table if you need to. Why is it sometimes hard to spot them? Do you have any connections to a specific group?
6. Contemplate how you would feel about that injustice happening to your parents, spouse, or children, and allow yourself silent reflection in order to feel the gravity of that situation.
7. Which of the five reasons to be personally involved connects with you?
 - I'll recognize Jesus.
 - Jesus will recognize me.
 - They belong to my family.
 - I'm one of the weak.
 - Limitless benefits.
8. Do you feel guilty or inadequate about past decisions? How can you "go out into the irresistible future with Him"?