

Why social justice is not Christian

By [David Williams](#)

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Oh, I don't believe that title. It's clickbait. I admit it. Mea culpa.

Justice matters, deeply and significantly, for anyone who cares about what Jesus taught or about the explicitly stated intent of Torah. It's just that ... well ... social justice does not provide the teleological framework that integrates me existentially. Or to put that a less willfully obfuscatory way, it is not my purpose. It is not my goal. It just isn't.

As a Christian who grew up in a progressive, justice-oriented faith community—one that I still love, and that still does wonderful work in the world—that realization has come slowly and with difficulty. I've resisted it, on many levels, because the injustices of our culture are so deep and insidious.

The lie of race and the ever deepening concentration of power in the hands of an isolated, privileged elite are very real and a blight on the soul of our culture. Our willingness to trample on the disenfranchised and our abuse of creation is demonic, and must be resisted. Oppression is not something to be tolerated. The God who calls me is fiercely, terrifyingly, relentlessly just, and our failure to embrace that truth has ... well ... [consequences](#).

And yet social justice as a governing purpose would misrepresent the primary commitment of my faith, if I am honest with myself.

This is Augustine's fault, of course. I don't always agree with his anthropology or his lingering Manichean view of the cause of human brokenness, but *The City of God* left a mark. And it's Reinhold Niebuhr's fault. *Moral Man and Immoral Society* was just too formative, too rational, too dead on about the moral limitations of collectives and interest groups. I blame Gandhi's *satyagraha* and Martin Luther King Jr.'s *soul force*. I blame Tolstoy.

And [I blame Jesus](#). And [Paul](#). And [James](#).

Because justice is the fruit of grace, not the other way around. Social justice is about rights, both individual and collective, within a broader entity. It is about the balance of competing interests in a society. It's a matter of legality, of the application of coercive power towards the maintenance of social order. Justice, meaning social, secular justice, rests on the sword. Social justice is about power dynamics.

That doesn't mean, not for a moment, that both noting and resisting oppressive structures is wrong.

Because systemic injustice is fundamentally devoid of grace, the abnegation of grace, a repudiation of grace. Grace recoils at hatred and oppression. Grace shudders at our gleeful embrace of violence. Grace finds wealth in the face of another's poverty an embarrassment. Grace does not stand idly by. Grace is the enemy of both individual and collective self-seeking.

As such, it is the both the ground of justice and the method by which justice is created.

And it goes deeper than that. In the absence of a grounding orientation towards grace, the pursuit of justice will either shatter or calcify a soul. It will shatter a soul because the competing demands of justice are too damnably complicated. Pay for migrant laborers is The Issue. #Blacklivesmatter is The Issue. Transphobia is The Issue. Environmental degradation is The Issue. The impact of globalization is The Issue.

It's an endless series of fractally complex cries, each one calling for the fullness of your attention, a chaotic din, an ocean's roar of human suffering. [No normal human can take that in.](#)

It creates popcorn soul, attention deficit justice disorder, as the well-meaning warrior frets and chases after whatever buzzes loudest and most impatiently on their #twitterfeed that day. And because everything must get done, and everything must be perfect, nothing gets done.

It calcifies a soul. The anxiety that arises from the immensity of human brokenness creates within those who resist it a shadow of that brokenness. The perpetrators of injustice become the Other. We cease to see the soul blight that curses them as fully as it curses those who suffer. They are commies and fascists, racists and mooching parasites. It hardens us to them, and to the possibility of their being called and

convicted to be part of the change. We would rather fight and mock and attack.

Without a vision of grace to guide us, we would take up the sword. We would wear that ring of power.

And when we do, we might imagine we are fighting the good fight.

But it is a fantasy. Because without grace as both our intent and our method, all we're doing is fighting.

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