

Jesus and Justice – Class V

When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers. - Proverbs 21:15

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” — Martin Luther King Jr., Letter from the Birmingham Jail

I. Biblical Justice

Justice is an attribute of God. God is the author of Justice and He holds the copyright on the concept. It is a theme that can be traced throughout the entirety of Scripture. It is not an add on to the Christian life, but rather it is a key component of our walk with God! Biblically speaking, righteousness and justice are two sides of the same coin. These two words are used interchangeably throughout the Bible. Something cannot be righteous if it is not just, and it cannot be considered just if it isn't righteous.

Justice is the idea of rendering every human what they are due based upon the perfect standard of God's Word. As Christians we are called to Do Justice. This involves an active commitment to treating people justly, speaking out against injustice, and working to eliminate systems that perpetuate injustice. This is what motivates God throughout the Old and New Testaments in His judgments on sin and injustice. These judgments are both individual and corporate in scope.

- A. OT Law** - Within the Old Testament Law, we witness God (Yahweh) speaking through His chosen leader Moses in order to establish a set of statutes and mandates that would set Israel apart from other Nations. Throughout the entire Pentateuch, God sets forth a set of laws that are intended to root out two primary evils. The two evils that God seeks to root out within the OT Law are Idolatry and Injustice (Ex.20, Lev.19). God spoke through Moses to ensure that the People of Israel did not worship false gods, or deal with people unjustly. (Ex 20:3, Duet. 10:18, Deut. 16:20).
- B. 8th Century Prophets** - The 8th Century Prophets were prophets of God whose ministry spanned throughout Israel during the period of 799 B.C.-700 B.C. The 8th century prophets include: Jonah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. With the exception of Jonah, all of the 8th century prophets placed a clear emphasis on Biblical Justice and how the corporate injustice and idolatry of a nation would ultimately result in God's justice and discipline. Amos would speak primarily to the issue of pious religious rituals that are void of real love and justice for one's neighbor. (Amos 5:18-25). Hosea's life would serve as a picture of how Israel's constantly rebelled against God, but God's grace and mercy would compel Him to forgive Israel and bring them back into fellowship. Micah provides a clear mandate of what it means to practically live out Biblical Justice in every arena of life (Micah 6:8). Isaiah demonstrates God's punishment of a nation that is given to idolatry and injustice, while promising complete restoration through the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. (Isaiah 40: 27-31).
- C. New Testament** - Within the New Testament we witness the concept of Biblical justice on full display in the life and Ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus makes a clear announcement of His Messianic Mission in Luke 4:18-19. At the core of Jesus' mission is a ministry that points people to be vertically connected to God throughout a saving relationship with Christ and to demonstrate our faith through the way that we love people both individually and corporately. A clear example of Jesus' commitment to this mission is his harsh rebuke of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23. Here Jesus states that the Pharisees have neglected the "weightier matters" of the Law, which are Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness.

This Biblical Commitment to Justice would serve as the foundation and motivation that would undergird the Civil Rights movement and its Leaders as they sought to tear down the systems of injustice that supported the mistreatment of African American People in the United States.

II. Defining the Civil Rights Movement

- A. **Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968)** - The Civil Rights Movement in America was a mass protest movement against the racial segregation and discrimination in the Southern region of the United States. This Christian-inspired movement placed an emphasis on non-violently confronting the immorality of segregation and the structurally engrained inequalities in American Society. The Civil Rights Movement had legislative aims. To that extent it was a political movement. But more than that it was a religious crusade sustained by Christian imagery and revivalist fervor. It arose out of Black Christian Culture, steeped in the rituals of mass meetings, revivalistic preaching, and sacred singing. Black Christians espoused a vision of a multiethnic reality embodied in the idea of the "Beloved Community". The leaders of the Civil Rights Movement believed that the idea of Christian nonviolent resistance to social evil could overpower social injustice and create human relations based on the Biblical themes of Love and Justice.
- B. **Civil Disobedience**- Civil Disobedience is the idea of refusing to obey the demands or commands of a government or occupying power, without resorting to violence or active measures of opposition; its usual purpose is to force concessions from the government or occupying power. Civil disobedience, is also known as passive resistance. This was the primary tactic utilized by the leaders of the Civil Rights movement.
- C. **The Role of the Black Church** - It is impossible to conceive of the Civil Rights Movement without placing Black Christianity at the center of this movement. Christianity is what empowered the leadership and the front-line participants. The Gospel is what made the Movement actually Move Forward. Further, Black Religious music, that was adopted as Freedom Songs inspired a movement culture that transformed a nation. The history of Black Christianity in America made that transformation possible.
- D. **Freedom Songs** - These were tunes adapted from traditional black religious music and set to new lyrics reflecting the lived experience of the Civil Rights struggle. Movement activist converted widely known spiritual hymns, church anthems, and popular songs, as Spiritual Manifestos that would come to be known as the soundtrack of the Movement.

III. Events that Sparked the Movement

- A. **Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)** - On May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The decision effectively overturned the separate but equal ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which had allowed Jim Crow laws that mandated separate public facilities for whites and African Americans to prevail throughout the South during the first half of the 20th century.

In 1951, Nine-year-old Linda Brown's Father did not want his little girl to have to cross railroad yards and a busy street in order to get to a school that offered a substandard education compared to the White Schools in Topeka, Kansas. Sumner Elementary School stood much closer to the Brown home and would offer better facilities, better trained teachers, and more funding for its programs. When the school's officials refused to let Brown attend there, he joined with four other cases which would become the famous *Brown vs. Topeka* case.

- B. **Emmett Till (1955)** - Fourteen year-old Emmett Till did not live in Mississippi but he would die there. Emmett begged his Mother, Mammie Till Mobley to let him go down to Mississippi so that he could visit with his cousins and get a break from the city life in his hometown of Chicago, Illinois. Mrs. Mobley allowed her son to go and that would be the last time that she would see her son alive. On August of 1955 Emmett Till and a few other black children went to Bryant's Grocery Store in Money, Mississippi. It was stated that he flirted with or whistled a white female shop keeper, Carolyn Bryant. That perceived slight would enrage Bryant's husband and Brother-in-law so much so that they would drive to the house that Emmett Till was staying in and drag him out.

Till's mutilated body... an ear sliced with a knife, his femur bones broken, an eye missing, a cracked skull, and a bullet hole above his ear, would turn up in a river a few days later. In a fateful and brave decision, Till's mother would decide to have an open casket funeral so that the world could see what the hatred of white racists had done to her boy. The shocking images of Emmett Till's body would show up in Jet Magazine and other media outlets and lead to a national outcry!

- C. **Rosa Parks (1955)** - On December 1, 1955, just a few months after the death of Emmett Till, the 42-year old Rosa Parks was demanded to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus and would spark a Boycott that would catapult a young 26- Year Old Minister named Martin Luther King Jr. to national renown.
- D. **The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956)** - The subsequent arrest of Rosa Parks initiated a sustained bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. The protest began on December 5, led by Martin Luther King Jr., then a young local pastor, and was so successful that it was extended indefinitely. In the ensuing months, protestors faced threats, arrests, and termination from their jobs. Nonetheless, the boycott continued for 1 year and 15 days. Finally, the Supreme Court upheld a lower court's ruling that segregated seating was unconstitutional, and the federal decision went into effect on December 20, 1956.
- E. **Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing (1963)**- On September 15, 1963, four young girls busily prepared for a "Youth Day" Service at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The girls along with other children in the congregation would spend the next few hours singing, reciting poems, praying, and encouraging their fellow congregants. The girls- Addie Mae Collins (14), Denise McNair (11), Carole Robertson (14), and Cynthia Wesley (14), had just finished Sunday School, were in the basement making the final adjustments to their white dresses, when all of the sudden the bombs exploded. The blast, which killed all four girls and injured 20 others, left a hole in the basement floor that was five feet wide and two feet deep. A Newspaper article would report that all of the stain glass windows of the church had been destroyed, except for one that contained a picture of Jesus Christ leading a group of little children. This despicable event would garner national attention, and play a critical role in leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

IV. Key Figures & Organizations

- A. **Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968)**- Born Michael King Jr on Jan. 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. King would come from a great lineage of educated African American Baptist Pastors. As a third generation Baptist Pastor, Dr. King would become the most prominent leader and voice of the Civil Rights movement in America. Dr. King would shed light on the relationship between Jesus Christ, freedom, and non-violent resistance in many of his speeches that often took form of African American narrative sermons. King is quoted stating this about his philosophy during the Civil Rights movement, a Philosophy that combined the teachings of Jesus Christ and the actions of Gandhi. " While Jesus taught the spirit, Gandhi had captured the technique of putting that spirit into action. Gandhi took the love of Jesus and distilled it into a great social force that transformed the colonial subjects of the British empire into independent citizens of India". From his work in and study of the Black Church, Study of the Scripture, and the Social Gospel, King understood that Gospel would serve as the most powerful tool for social reform. From his study of Gandhi, King learned that non-violence could be used as an effective tool to change society. King would eventually combine the Christian doctrine of love with

the Gandhian method of non-violence, and this would prove to be a potent force that would lead to change in America.

- B. Southern Christian Leadership Conference (S.C.L.C.)**- established by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1957, and led by activists Ralph Abernathy, Bayard Rustin, and Fred Shuttlesworth that coordinated and assisted local organizations working for the full equality of African Americans in all aspects of American life. The organization operated primarily in the south and some border states, conducting leadership-training programs, citizen-education projects, and voter-registration drives. The SCLC played a major part in the March on Washington in 1963 and in notable antidiscrimination and voter-registration efforts in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi in the early 1960s—campaigns that spurred passage of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- C. Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.)** - Founded in 1960 by Ella Baker, The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was a civil-rights group formed to give younger Black people (College Students) more of a voice in the civil rights movement. The SNCC soon became one of the movement’s more radical branches. In the wake of the Greensboro sit-in at a lunch counter closed to Black people, Ella Baker, then director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), helped set up the first meeting of what became the SNCC at Shaw College (Black Baptist Institution) in Raleigh, North Carolina. The students at this meeting in 1960 intended to form a Youth Wing of the SCLC, but Baker urged the students not to be co-opted by adults. She wanted them to push the movement forward in dramatic new directions.
- D. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.)** - The NAACP or National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was established in 1909 and is America’s oldest and largest civil rights organization. It was formed in New York City by white and Black activists, partially in response to the ongoing violence against African Americans around the country. The NAACP played a pivotal role in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. One of the organization’s key victories was the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown vs. Education of Topeka* that outlawed segregation in public schools. Pioneering civil-rights attorney Thurgood Marshall to the head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF), successfully argued the case before the court. Marshall, who founded the LDF in 1940, won a number of other important civil rights cases involving issues such as voting rights and discriminatory housing practices. In 1967, he became the first African American to serve as a Supreme Court justice. The NAACP also helped organize the 1963 March on Washington one of the biggest civil rights rallies in U.S. history, and had a hand in running 1964’s Mississippi Freedom Summer, an initiative to register Black Mississippians to vote. During this era, the NAACP also successfully lobbied for the passage of landmark legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 barring racial discrimination in voting.
- E. Fannie Lue Hamer (1917-1977)**- Born to sharecroppers in Montgomery County, Mississippi, in 1917, Fannie Lou was the youngest of 20 children. She grew up on a Sunflower County plantation and in the mid-1940s she married Perry Hamer, a tractor driver on a nearby plantation. For the next 18 years, she worked as a sharecropper and a timekeeper for the plantation owner. In 1963, on her way to Septima Clark’s citizenship school in Charleston, South Carolina, Hamer was so severely beaten in the Winona, Mississippi, jail that she suffered kidney damage and was made partially blind. That year, Hamer, then in her forties, became the oldest SNCC employee and worked as a field secretary for the organization. In 1964, Hamer helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), an alternative to the state’s white-controlled Democratic Party. When the MFDP challenged the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, Hamer gave an impassioned account of the violence she and other civil rights activists had suffered while attempting to register. Although news networks started a live broadcast of her testimony, President Lyndon B. Johnson scheduled a live address at the same time, forcing networks to break away from her speech. Hamer closed her testimony, which was later broadcast in full on the evening news, by stating: “If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America” (Lee, 89). Speaking after Hamer and the other MFDP delegates, King told the committee, you “cannot imagine the anguish and

suffering they have undergone to get to this point,” and urged the committee to recognize the MFDP (King, 22 August 1964).

- F. John Lewis (1940-2020)** - John Robert Lewis was born outside of Troy, Alabama, on February 21, 1940. Lewis had a happy childhood — though he needed to work hard to assist his sharecropper parents — but he chafed against the unfairness of segregation. In 1957, Lewis left Alabama to attend the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville, Tennessee. There, he learned about nonviolent protest and helped to organize sit-ins at segregated lunch counters. He was arrested during these demonstrations, which upset his mother, but Lewis was committed to the civil rights movement and went on to participate in the Freedom Rides of 1961. Freedom Riders challenged the segregated facilities they encountered at interstate bus terminals in the South, which had been deemed illegal by the Supreme Court. It was dangerous work that resulted in arrests and beatings for many involved, including Lewis. In 1963, Lewis became chairman of the SNCC. That same year, as one of the "Big Six" leaders of the civil rights movement, he helped plan the March on Washington. Lewis — the youngest speaker at the event — had to alter his speech in order to please other organizers, but still delivered a powerful oration that declared, "We all recognize the fact that if any radical social, political and economic changes are to take place in our society, the people, the masses, must bring them about. After the March on Washington, in 1964, the Civil Rights Act became law. However, this did not make it easier for African Americans to vote in the South. To bring attention to this struggle, Lewis and Hosea Williams led a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 7, 1965. After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the marchers were attacked by state troopers. Lewis was severely beaten once more, this time suffering a fractured skull. The violent attacks were recorded and disseminated throughout the country, and the images proved too powerful to ignore. "Bloody Sunday" as the day was labeled, sped up the passage of Voting Rights Act of 1965.
- G. The Big Six (Civil Rights Organizers)** - The "Big Six" is a term used to describe the six most prominent Black civil rights leaders during the 1960s. These men were linchpins of power behind the movement and would be responsible for organizing the March on Washington, which took place in the nation's capital in 1963. A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), James Farmer Jr. (1920-1999), John Lewis (1940-2020), Whitney Young Jr. (1921-1971), Roy Wilkins (1901-1981).
- H. Shirley Chisholm (1924 - 2005)** - Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm was the first African American woman in Congress (1968) and the first woman and African American to seek the nomination for president of the United States from one of the two major political parties (1972). She graduated from Brooklyn Girls' High in 1942 and from Brooklyn College cum laude in 1946, where she won prizes on the debate team. She earned a master's degree from Columbia University in early childhood education in 1951. By 1960, she was a consultant to the New York City Division of Day Care. Ever aware of racial and gender inequality, she joined local chapters of the League of Women Voters, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, as well as the Democratic Party club in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

In 1964, Chisholm ran for and became the second African American in the New York State Legislature. After court-ordered redistricting created a new, heavily Democratic, district in her neighborhood, in 1968 Chisholm sought—and won—a seat in Congress. There, "Fighting Shirley" introduced more than 50 pieces of legislation and championed racial and gender equality, the plight of the poor, and ending the Vietnam War. She was a co-founder of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971, and in 1977 became the first Black woman and second woman ever to serve on the powerful House Rules Committee. Discrimination followed Chisholm's quest for the 1972 Democratic Party presidential nomination. She was blocked from participating in televised primary debates, and after taking legal action, was permitted to make just one speech. Still, students, women, and minorities followed the "Chisholm Trail." She entered 12 primaries and garnered 152 of the delegates' votes (10% of the total)—despite an under-financed campaign and contentiousness from the predominantly male Congressional Black Caucus.