

Beyond

MODEL

MODEL

MODEL

MINORITY

MINORITY

MINORITY

Faith

A Study Guide on Race and Faith

PART 4: GOSPEL AND JUSTICE

The following is a work in progress document under joint development by Epic Movement and the Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Initiated in Summer 2019, these materials reflect content last updated in January 2021.

If you use these studies, we welcome your feedback for incorporation into a final draft of the curriculum that will be completed in Summer 2021. Please direct all comments and inquiries to jasonchu@fuller.edu.

Grace and blessings to you.

PART 4: GOSPEL AND JUSTICE

Study Introduction

Welcome to *Beyond Model Minority Faith*, a Bible study curriculum on race and the Gospel. Over the next weeks, you'll be exploring some of the many intersections between Asian American issues and the Christian faith.

This study touches on many topics that may be difficult, personal, or new to you. As you begin each session, it may help to go over these ground rules, or refer to them during sessions:

- **Respect** one another's stories. Don't explicitly or implicitly talk down on, judge, invalidate, or criticize someone else's lived experiences.
- Speaking is not a competition; no one member of the group should dominate the conversation. **Hold space** for each other to think and reflect. Don't interrupt, jump in, or rush to have your voice or point heard.
- **Listen well.** Some of the subject matter we'll be covering could be sensitive or trigger past pain and hurt. When the study or another group member brings up emotions or ideas you don't expect, instead of getting argumentative or defensive, treat it as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and others.
- Respect *both* **personal experience and critical history**. Our lived experiences are valuable and need to be treated with respect. But often our personal life stories only reveal a narrow portion of the bigger picture; remember that what we are learning in this study will help reveal a broader historical context that helps us understand and locate our individual experiences more accurately.

We're excited and hopeful that you and your group will find truth, depth, and community on your journey together.

The Fuller Asian American Center
January 2021

SESSION 1: WHAT IS JUSTICE?

Over the last ten years, *justice* has become a loaded, politicized word. Some people cry for it (no justice, no peace!) while others use it like an insult (“Stop being such a self-righteous SJW”). In different ways, they’re both right. How do we navigate and choose between different visions of “justice”?

To start, we need to talk about two topics relating to justice: *What is it?* and *What does God have to do with it?*

Defining Justice

Fundamentally, justice means that wrongs are made right. This has three components:

1. Punitive

The notion of justice often goes hand in hand with the idea of punishment for the unjust. When someone has done something wrong, they should be fined, jailed, ordered to work off their debts, or otherwise given some kind of disciplinary action.

On one level, this may be simply *practical*. Punishment can serve as a deterrent to bad behavior; and so receiving negative reinforcement for negative behavior can serve as a good reason to avoid that behavior.

On the other hand, punishment is not just effective, but there is a *moral* dimension to it as well. There seems to be almost a deep-rooted, almost innate, human instinct that injustice deserves rebuke. When we observe someone hurting or taking from someone else, even if we haven’t been personally harmed, we feel morally outraged – “Look!” we say, “that’s not OK. Their actions need to have consequences.”

Justice means receiving consequences in reasonable proportion to the degree of improper action. “An eye for an eye”. If someone commits a flagrant offense to someone else and gets off with a slap on the wrist, we feel moral offense. On the other hand, if a minor infraction receives an excessive

response, we feel similarly uneasy, as if the punishment was itself a second injustice.

2. Reparative

Justice is also not only about the offender; it's also about the one who's been wronged. Justice should repair what was taken from them. If someone was scammed out of \$500, we don't just want the scammer to lose that \$500; we want the victim to get her \$500 back.

Reparation is often much, much more difficult than punishment. Sometimes, things get taken that can't come back: a lost life, freedom, time with loved ones. Multi-million dollar settlements can't erase the pain of losing decades spent unjustly jailed. A racist losing their job can feel good, but it rarely erases the trauma of the person who has been subjected to racist bullying or discrimination.

Still, as difficult as it might be, this is a crucial component of justice: not just punishing the offender, but healing the one who has been hurt.

3. Restorative

Last, and perhaps most difficult to imagine or achieve, is restoration. Not only do we want the person who has been hurt be healed, but we desire for the communities and relationships around them to be mended and set right.

Nelson Mandela was jailed for 27 years by a racist government for fighting against racial segregation in South Africa. When he was finally freed and elected as president of a newly de-segregated South Africa, Mandela resisted his supporters' cries to create a new power structure with Black South Africans on top and Whites on the bottom. Instead, he said, "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner."¹ Alongside the Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mandela set the foundation for a new society that would include both races as equal partners.

This might sound overly idealistic and utopian, perhaps because it has rarely been seen. And even when it has existed, this kind of equitable society often crumbles under the pressure of one or more parties' agendas and self-

¹ *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995).

interest. But what a beautiful idea it is: to not no longer fear your adversaries, but to have them work alongside you for a better world.

History has shown over and over again that people are not impartial. Often, when people who have been marginalized come into power, they begin by carrying out justice - but eventually simply become another oppressive ruler. Often, when former oppressors are forgiven and set free, they simply return to their previous way of living, just with more discretion and deception.

If justice seeks not only to punish, but to repair and restore the world, how can we possibly achieve it?

The Wisdom of God

In a letter to the early Christian church, the evangelist Paul speaks about the differences between the Christian message and other prevailing ideologies of his time:

18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

...

25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

–1 Corinthians 1:18-19, 25

A core understanding of the Christian faith is that the **kingdom of God** – life lived within the transforming influence and power of God – is fundamentally different from the ways of human authorities and societies. At its heart is the cross, the moment when God, having come to earth as Jesus Christ, took on the sin of all humankind and died in order to restore humanity’s relationship with God.

One reason why the cross is so pivotal in the Christian imagination is that it both satisfies and inverts human imaginations of justice, power, and divinity. Having taken our sin, Jesus also took the full punishment of sin – death and separation from God – satisfying punitive justice. He also invited women and men into a loving community, where their emotional, physical, spiritual, and relational wounds could be healed and cared for. Not only are we

healed, but by entering this community, sinners (everyone) and those who have been sinned against (also everyone), can be restored into the way that things were supposed to be: all of God's children together as part of a Beloved community. Amazing!

At the same time, it's a super weird story. What kind of God chooses to embrace weakness and die at the hands of God's creation? Couldn't God have just come down and helped us figure our problems out without dying? For that matter, if God is truly all-powerful, why is the world still so messed up?

For nearly two thousand years, Christian scholars and prophets have been wrestling with these questions. They've come up with many answers, some better and some worse, but in the end it comes down to: it's a mystery. We have to trust God.

Why Trust God?

You've probably heard an authority figure say "Don't worry. Just trust me." And sometimes that trust has paid off, but often people in power are sadly *untrustworthy*. Even if they have the best of intentions, their own agendas, desires, and limitations lead to them missing the mark and causing more problems.

You may have heard the statement, "absolute power corrupts absolutely." The difference between God and human authorities is that God wields power in a fundamentally different way than human beings. Where humans strive to fill our imperfections with money, power, sex, and manipulation, God is already perfect. Through an ancient prophet, God said "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed" (Malachi 3:6). God isn't whimsical or malicious; and so God's power doesn't come at the cost of those God has power over.

God also cares deeply about those who are hurting. God is on the side of justice: for the oppressed (Romans 12:19), marginalized (Deuteronomy 27:19), and those without anyone to care for them (Psalm 68:5). But God is not a *tribal* god or our servant, hijacked by the agenda and interests of any one group; God cares about everyone in their own stories and experiences.

When we follow this God, not only are we taken care of, but we are transformed to see power and authority as qualities to be used to help free others from the sins that have held them down.

SESSION 2:

HOW DO WE DO THE WORK OF JUSTICE?

Last session, we talked about justice – what it looks like, and how the only way we can ever really find it is by turning to God. When God embraces us, not only do we find justice, but by following God we start learning to bring justice and grace into the world around us too.

It sounds great. But what does that actually look like? We'll end this series by talking about how to start bringing God's justice in the world around us.

Take Care

*We gon' be alright - Do you hear me, do you feel me?
We gon' be alright.*

–Kendrick Lamar, *Alright*

Truth, love, and grace are all core components of a just lifestyle. If we want to help the oppressed and heal the hurting, we need to know the reality of people's situations and needs. We need to love them deeply, too; and extend grace to those whose actions and beliefs may not align with ours.

Justice starts by **taking care of ourselves.**

In the face of supremacist systems that profit at the cost of emotional and personal commodification of marginalized bodies, it is revolutionary to take time to nurture ourselves. Our pain, exhaustion, psychological trauma, and physical wellbeing deserve dignity and healing. Taking rest ("sabbath", in the Christian tradition) reminds us that our lives and humanity are valuable beyond what we can produce and deliver for ourselves and others.

Not only that, but if we are still nursing unaddressed issues, we will discover that our pursuit of "justice" can easily become a form of therapy or coping for ourselves. It's easy for us to project our own needs and wants onto the struggles of those around us. When this happens, "doing justice" often turns performative or into compensation for what we think we're missing. "Hurt people hurt people" – even when we start out with the best of intentions. If

we go into “doing justice” focused on what we need or want, manipulation or exploitation of the people we’re “helping” soon follows.

Justice doesn’t end with our personal healing. Justice moves outward, to **know and love those around us**.

That first verb is just as important as the second! Without seeing, hearing, and being keenly aware of what’s going on around us, we actually can’t love well. “Charity” that doesn’t consider the needs of the people and communities it’s given to is often unhelpful and even intrusive – like giving canned goods to a person on the street who has no can opener, or unwanted dating advice to someone whose romantic life you know nothing about.

Truly knowing people and communities starts with giving them space and agency to share their experiences and felt needs. As we see and hear their life stories, we begin to understand the histories of affirmation and pain that they carry. We are all shaped by our unique encounters and **social locations** – the combination of social characteristics (race, gender, income, wealth, geography, religion, education, language, ability, etc.) that our societies consider important.

If we want to help people find justice, we need to know the joy and injustice they have encountered and even been complicit in. For example, if a Vietnamese American friend is experiencing depression after a recent bad breakup, it helps to be aware of how this may be impacted by her experiences of gendered racism and stereotypes in media and previous relationships, her family’s expectations of her romantic life, financial factors, generational trauma from war and refugee experiences, and more.

Last, we must **do justice with others**.

It isn’t justice if it’s “just us”

Attempting to “do justice” without being in community with those who have come before, alongside, and after us is empty and self-centered. It’s like playing League without any other human players logged on: fun at first, but ultimately just a shallow facsimile of the true experience.

There is a rich history of Asian American activists that stretches back for 150+ years. We can look to the Tape family, who fought for desegregating school districts in the 1880s; Larry Itliong, who founded the agricultural labor movement; Fred Korematsu, who challenged WWII Japanese American incarceration; and Civil Rights leaders like Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs. Erased from history books, their legacies provide us with powerful

stories of Asian Americans building community and standing with other groups to fight for justice.

If we cry for racial justice for Asian Americans without also fighting for Blacks, Natives, Latino/as, women, the differently abled, and other marginalized groups, our “justice” becomes selfish and suspicious. Why should anyone else care about our “justice” if all it means is self-advancement and not the actual transformation and healing of society?

Not only that, but we are indebted to other racial activists for their work; most Asian Americans would not even be in America if not for the work of Black Civil Rights leaders who helped overturn the racist Chinese Exclusion Act in 1965.

The Spirit of Truth

Even with self-awareness, a listening heart, and wise partners, calls for justice can often turn self-serving and cynical. How do we navigate and discern between the many different messages and visions of “justice” that we hear and see around us? In times of confusion and need, God promises us aid.

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.

17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

18 “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

...

26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

–John 14:15-19, 26-27

God doesn't leave us alone to fend for ourselves. As Christians who follow and obey the God of truth and love, we can turn to the **Holy Spirit**, a divine presence that fills and transforms us. As we live and pray with this "Spirit of *truth*", it enables us to separate God's truth from fallible human ideologies, even when those ideas may seem logical, just, or attractive.²

So often when our eyes are opened to the reality of the world around us, it brings distress, pain, and fear. There are so many wrong and dangerous things in this world, and it can be scary to confront them: systemic racism, the possibility of falling suddenly ill, the vast numbers of women and children living in unsafe and unstable environments. But the Holy Spirit is not just a spirit of truth, but also of peace. God reveals truth, but also provides us with a divine *peace* that keeps us grounded in unending hope.

God is a God of justice. God cares deeply about human pain and injustice, and calls us to be committed to healing and change.³ By embracing the Holy Spirit, learning to listen and hear the presence of God, we can grow in our understanding of the difficult work around us while not growing overwhelmed and losing heart. This empowers us to stay passionately involved in the work of justice while avoiding cynicism and burnout.

Closing Reflection

God doesn't manipulate God's children. When we follow God's call to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God", we aren't used up and discarded but cared for and nurtured. **Salvation** isn't just about where we go when we die – it's about the shape and health of our souls, communities, and world. Our Jewish brothers and sisters have a phrase, *tikkun olam*, that describes the work of "repairing the world" around us, bringing God's *shalom* (peace and wholeness) back to a fallen and broken world.

Justice isn't just about changing our societies, but about restoring and healing everything in and around us. This includes unjust systems of race, gender, and wealth; the environment; and even the ugliest parts of our own souls. This is the **Kingdom of Heaven** – the universe as it was designed to be, as good and harmonious as the God who created and has authority over it.

² "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (1 John 4:1); "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ." (Colossians 2:8)

³ "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

And this is the good news (*Gospel*) of Jesus Christ: we aren't abandoned to do the difficult and never-ending work of justice by ourselves. If we ask, we will receive the presence of the God of truth and peace.



Close by getting into small groups and praying for each other. Pray that God will give you the grace and wisdom to be at peace even as you find ways to help and heal the world around you.