Righteousness: A Closer Look

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Unless otherwise noted, scripture quotations are from the ESV®.

1. Right

Everyone knows what "right" means. A teacher marks an answer right. Two people argue, and one insists, "I'm in the right." We tell our children to do the right thing. When we have wronged someone, we try to make it right.

We use the word so easily that we rarely notice how much it carries. Each of those everyday phrases assumes something:

- A **right answer** assumes a standard. The answer is right because it matches something outside itself.
- Being **in the right** assumes a relationship or a dispute, and a verdict about who stands where.
- Doing the **right thing** assumes conduct, something actually done.
- **Making it right** assumes that something was broken and can be restored.

Hold on to those four. They turn out to be a map of what the Bible means by righteousness.

The word inside the word

"Righteous" can sound like a church word, far from ordinary life. It isn't. It comes from the Old English *rihtwīs*, "right-wise." The "-wise" is the same one we still hear in "likewise" and "otherwise," meaning "in the way of." To be righteous, at root, is to be right in one's way, right in how one is and how one lives.

If the word feels distant, that is partly because of what has happened to it. "Righteous" can suggest someone stiff or churchy. "Self-righteous" suggests someone who thinks he is better than others. Neither is what the Bible means, and the starting point is the plain word inside the long one: *right*.

One word, not three

English translations create a confusion the Bible text does not have. We have "righteousness" and "justice," "righteous" and "just," and the verb "justify," and we tend to hear them as separate ideas: righteousness is about personal goodness, justice is about courts and society, and "justify" means making excuses.

In the New Testament Greek, these words belong to one family. The main word is *dikaiosynē* (dee-kai-oh-SOO-nay), and the verb "to justify" is *dikaioō* (dee-kai-OH-oh), from the same root. Behind them stands the Old Testament's Hebrew word *tsedaqah* (tseh-dah-KAH).[1] English translations, especially of the New Testament, move between "righteous" and "just" depending on the sentence, but the underlying word is often the same.[2]

A few examples show what is lost when the family is split up:

- Joseph is called "a **just** man" (Matthew 1:19). The same Greek word is translated "righteous" elsewhere, as when Simeon is called "**righteous** and devout" (Luke 2:25).
- Paul writes that God is "**just** and the **justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26). In Greek, "just" and "justifier" are the same word family.[3] God is *right*, and He *puts people in the right*.

So, when the Bible speaks of righteousness, it is not speaking only of private goodness. And when it speaks of justice, it is not speaking only of law courts or politics. It is one idea: what is right, and what it means to be in the right.

A word of caution

One modern use of the word does not belong here. When we speak of "rights," we usually mean entitlements, things a person can claim as his or her due. That is a different idea. Biblical righteousness begins not with what I can claim, but with what is right in God's sight.

Right toward whom?

There is one more thing to notice about the everyday word. "Right" almost always assumes someone or something else. An answer is right according to a standard. A person is in the right toward someone. Wrongs are made right with someone.

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[1] When Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek in the centuries before Christ (the Septuagint), they regularly used *dikaiosynē* for *tsedaqah*. So, when the New Testament writers used the Greek word, it already carried the Hebrew meaning with it. Context is always important when we see the word righteousness in the NT—are we talking about God and His nature, or His righteousness in action; is the topic the righteousness and righteous life of Christ, or the gift of righteousness that we receive, or the righteous way we are supposed to live in response—lots of options, so context is key.

[2] The Old Testament often pairs *tsedaqah* with *mishpat* (mish-PAHT), usually translated "justice," which comes from a different root. Some New Testament passages that speak of "justice" use a different Greek word, *krisis* (KREE-sis), which is closer to *mishpat*, as in Matthew 12:18, 20. Our focus here is on *dikaiosynē* and the righteousness it describes.

[3] The courtroom lies close to the root of these words. In Deuteronomy 25:1, judges are to "acquit the innocent" (literally, "declare righteous the righteous") and condemn the guilty. That is where "justify" gets its biblical sense: not to excuse, but to declare in the right.

The Bible's use of the word is the same. Righteousness is almost never an abstract quality floating free. It is rightness *toward* someone: toward God first, and from there toward others. That raises the question the rest of this study follows: right by whose standard?

2. Right by Whose Standard?

A builder checks a wall with a level. A shopkeeper weighs goods on a scale. A referee calls a play by the rulebook. In each case, "right" means measured against something, and the measurement is only as good as the standard. A scale that reads two ounces light will make every weighing wrong, no matter how carefully it is used.

The Bible itself uses this picture. The law of Moses required honest measures: "You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin" (Leviticus 19:36). The Hebrew word behind "just" there is *tsedeq*, from the righteousness family. A righteous scale is one that measures true. So, the question underneath righteousness is not only "Am I right?" but "Right according to what?"

The self as the standard

The most natural answer is to measure by ourselves. The book of Judges describes a time when Israel did exactly that, and it sums up the result in one repeated line: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6; 21:25). The stories that surround that line are among the darkest in Scripture.

Proverbs explains why this standard fails:

- "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes" (Proverbs 12:15).
- "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Proverbs 14:12).
- "Every way of a man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart" (Proverbs 21:2).

The problem is not that people lack a sense of right. It is that the measure and the thing measured are the same. A ruler cannot check its own length.

The same is true of a whole society. Shared opinion can drift as easily as individual opinion, and Isaiah warns against those "who call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20). A standard that moves with the culture is not much of a standard.

God as the standard

Scripture's answer is that the standard is God Himself. Not a rulebook above God that He too must follow, and not arbitrary decrees, but His own character:

- "The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice [*mishpat*]. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just [*tsaddiq*] and upright [*yashar*] is he" (Deuteronomy 32:4).[4]
- "Shall not the Judge [*shophet*] of all the earth do what is just [*mishpat*]?" (Genesis 18:25).
- "Righteous [*tsaddiq*] are you, O LORD, and right [*yashar*] are your rules [*mishpatim*]" (Psalm 119:137).

In all three verses, the words translated "just," "justice," and "righteous" (and in Psalm 119, "rules") come from the *tsedaqah* and *mishpat* words introduced in section 1. Psalm 119:137 puts our everyday word and the Bible's word side by side. God is *righteous*, and therefore His rules are *right*. What is right flows from who He is.

Where we see the standard

If the standard is God's character, how do we know what it looks like? Scripture points to three places.

In His commands. "The precepts of the LORD are right [*yashar*], rejoicing the heart" (Psalm 19:8). God's commands are not random; they show His character in practical form. Micah summarizes them simply: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

In His relationship with His people. God did not hand Israel a list of rules and wait to see who passed. The Ten Commandments begin, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Rescue came first; the commands followed. The standard was given within a relationship God had already begun.

Most fully in Jesus. The New Testament calls him "the Holy and Righteous One" (Acts 3:14) and "Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). He is "the exact imprint of [God's] nature" (Hebrews 1:3). If we want to know what right looks like, we look at him. The standard has a face.

The plumb line

The prophet Amos was given a vision of this standard. He saw the Lord standing beside a wall with a plumb line in His hand, a weight on a string that hangs perfectly straight. Then God said, "Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel" (Amos 7:7–8).[5]

A plumb line does not argue. It simply hangs true, and anything built beside it is shown to be straight or crooked. Hebrew uses that very picture: the "right" of Psalm 119:137 is *yashar*,

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[4] The Hebrew word translated here as "perfect" is *tamim*—that which is whole, sound, complete. It is related to "*tom*" which is regularly translated as "integrity." Not unusual for *tamim* to be combined with *yashar*—level, straight, upright.

[5] The Hebrew word Amos uses, *anak*, appears only in this passage, and its meaning is debated. Many translations render it "plumb line," while some scholars suggest "tin" or "lead." The picture of a measuring standard fits the context either way.

"straight" or "upright." That is what God's righteousness does. It is not one opinion among many; it is the line against which every wall is measured, including the ones we have built ourselves.

Why this makes righteousness relational

Because the standard is God Himself and not merely a code, righteousness is relational. Being right means being right toward and with God, and from there, toward others. This is why the question from section 1, "Right toward whom?" matters so much.

It also raises a harder question. If the standard is God Himself, holy and perfectly right, then who measures up? That is the subject of the next section.

3. Who Measures Up? Being Put Right

An honest scale is good news for the honest merchant and bad news for the dishonest one.
A plumb line is welcome when the wall is straight. When the wall leans, the same line shows the fault, and the line cannot be adjusted to fit the wall.

That is the uncomfortable side of section 2. If God Himself is the standard, then the question is no longer whether we are better than others. It is whether we are right by His measure.

The problem

Scripture's answer is consistent and blunt:

- "Enter not into judgment [*mishpat*] with your servant, for no one living is righteous [*tsadeq*] before you" (Psalm 143:2).
- "Surely there is not a righteous [*tsaddiq*] man on earth who does good and never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).
- "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds [*tsedaqah*] are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6).
- "None is righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10); "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Notice two things. First, this is not said only about notoriously bad people. The psalmist who prays Psalm 143 is a man of faith. Second, Isaiah says even our *righteous deeds* fall short. The problem is not just our worst moments but our best ones.

The apostle Paul is the clearest example. Before he met Christ, he could say that "as to righteousness under the law," he was "blameless" (Philippians 3:6). By any human measure he was a model. Yet he later counted all of it as loss (Philippians 3:7–8).

Two wrong responses

People usually respond to this problem in one of two ways.

The first is to **lower the standard**: to go back to measuring by ourselves, or by people around us, where we compare more favorably. That is the way of Judges and Proverbs from section 2.

The second is to **try harder**: to keep the standard and aim to reach it by effort. This looks more serious, but Jesus warned about where it leads. He told a parable "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). Trying to earn righteousness tends to produce either despair or pride.

The courtroom

Scripture offers a third way, and it uses the picture of a courtroom. In the Old Testament, a judge's task was to examine a case and declare who was in the right (Deuteronomy 25:1). That declaration is what the Bible means by "justify": not to excuse, but to declare a person in the right.[6]

Jesus's parable continues with two men praying in the temple. A Pharisee lists his religious accomplishments. A tax collector, a man everyone knew to be compromised, will not even look up; he can only say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus's verdict is startling: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other" (Luke 18:13–14).

The tax collector was not declared right because he had earned it. He was declared right because he stopped pretending, he humbled himself, and threw himself on God's mercy.

Righteousness as a gift

This is the heart of the matter. The righteousness God requires is the righteousness God gives.

It was true from the beginning. Long before the law of Moses, "Abram believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). David sang of it: "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven… the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity" (Psalm 32:1–2). Paul quotes both texts to show that this is not a new idea (Romans 4:3, 6–8).

The New Testament shows it fully in Christ:

- "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law… the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe" (Romans 3:21–22).
- Those who believe "are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24).
- God "justifies the ungodly" (Romans 4:5), which is exactly what the tax collector discovered.

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[6] See note 3.

- Paul gave up “a righteousness of my own that comes from the law” for “the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Philippians 3:9).

How can God do this and still be just?

A judge who simply acquitted the guilty would not be a righteous judge. So how can God declare sinners right without lowering His own standard?

Scripture’s answer is the cross. Isaiah foresaw a righteous servant who would “make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” (Isaiah 53:11). Peter says, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). Paul describes an exchange: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

That verse is often quoted but not necessarily clearly understood. The potential issue is the figurative language being used. Christ did not literally turn into sin any more than believers literally turn into righteousness. Paul means that Christ, who committed no sin, was treated **as if** a sinner: our sin was counted against him, and he bore its penalty. The Old Testament supplies the background. The Hebrew word for “sin,” *chatta’ah*, is also the ordinary word for a “sin offering” (Leviticus 4:3), the sacrifice that died in the sinner’s place, and Isaiah says the servant made “his soul an offering for guilt” (Isaiah 53:10). The second half of the verse works the same way in reverse. Believers do not literally become righteousness; they are counted as right before God because they are joined to Christ (“in him”). He took our guilty standing and the punishment associated with it (ultimately death), and we receive his righteous standing and the blessings associated with it (ultimately everlasting life).

This is how God shows that He is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Romans 3:26). The standard is not lowered. It is met, and the one who meets it shares his standing with those who trust him.

What faith is, and is not

Faith is not a good work that earns the verdict, as if believing were simply a more spiritual kind of effort. Faith is trust: receiving what God offers rather than offering Him something. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

The result is peace: “Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).[7]

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[7] Readers sometimes notice that James writes, “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24), and wonder whether he contradicts Paul. Both quote the same verse, Genesis 15:6. Paul is addressing the ground of a

Standing comes first

This order matters for everything that follows. Israel was rescued from Egypt before receiving the commands at Sinai (section 2). In the same way, a person is put right with God before learning to live rightly within this new covenant.

That does not make the way we live unimportant. The very next verse after Ephesians 2:8–9 says we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Ephesians 2:10). But the good works are the fruit of being put right, not the price of it. Being right inside and right outside, the subjects of the next two sections, grow from a standing that God has already given.

4. Right Inside

A film set can show a whole street of shops: windows, signs, doors with brass handles. Walk around behind them and there is nothing but plywood and bracing. From the front, it looks like a town. It is only a front.

Jesus used a sharper picture. "You are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27–28).

Those words were spoken to the most religious people of his day. Their outward conduct was careful. What was missing was inside.

God looks at the heart

This is not Jesus bringing forward a new idea. When the prophet Samuel was sent to anoint a king over Israel, he was impressed by the tallest of Jesse's sons. God corrected him: "the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). Section 2 quoted Proverbs: "the LORD weighs the heart" (Proverbs 21:2).

In Scripture the heart is more than feelings. It is the center of a person: where we think, choose, desire, and decide.[8] That is why Proverbs says, "Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

The Old Testament already described righteousness from the inside:

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person's standing before God: it is never earned. James is addressing a "faith" that is only talk and changes nothing (James 2:14–17). Genuine faith receives the gift, and genuine faith shows itself in action.

[8] The Hebrew word for heart, *lev* (or *levav*), refers to the inner person as a whole: mind, will, and desires as well as emotions. "The heart of man plans his way" (Proverbs 16:9). The New Testament's Greek word, *kardia*, carries the same sense: the heart is where a person decides (2 Corinthians 9:7) and believes (Romans 10:10).

- The one who may dwell with God "walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart" (Psalms 15:2).
- After his great sin, David prayed, "You delight in truth in the inward being" and "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalms 51:6, 10).
- Moses promised that "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart" (Deuteronomy 30:6), a sign not cut in the body but in the inner life.

Jesus presses inward

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his listeners that their righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). He did not mean more rules. He meant deeper ones.

- Not only murder, but anger and contempt (Matthew 5:21–22).
- Not only adultery, but lust in the heart (Matthew 5:27–28).
- Not only good deeds, but good deeds done for the right reason: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them" (Matthew 6:1). Giving, praying, and fasting are to be done before God, not for an audience (Matthew 6:2–18).

Jesus also named the source of the problem: "from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts" and the wrongs that follow (Mark 7:21–23).

Inside and outside matching

The opposite of the whitewashed tomb is a life that is the same all the way through: right inside and right outside, with nothing hidden behind the front. Scripture's word for this is often translated "blameless" or "integrity," and it carries the sense of being whole and undivided.[9] "The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight" (Proverbs 11:5).

David prayed for exactly this: "Unite my heart to fear your name" (Psalms 86:11). A divided heart produces a divided life. A united heart produces a life that matches.

Where a right heart comes from

If the heart is the problem, it cannot also be the solution. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). That doesn't mean the heart can't be shaped at all. Setting one's mind on God and His word can serve to direct desires toward what is right: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you" (Psalm 119:11). But even great commitment goes only so far. Even a well-conditioned heart still falls short, and it can't

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[9] The Hebrew word *tom* and its related words are often translated "integrity" or "blameless" and carry the sense of being complete or whole. The Hebrew word *yashar* means level, straight, or upright. Noah was "a righteous man, blameless in his generation" (Genesis 6:9), and Job was "blameless and upright" (Job 1:1). The two ideas often appear together: wholeness and straightness.

produce the new heart God promises (Ezekiel 36:26). We cannot make ourselves right inside by trying harder any more than we could earn our standing by trying harder (section 3).

The prophets looked forward to God doing what people could not:

- "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts" (Jeremiah 31:33).
- "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26).

The New Testament announces that this has begun: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). And it is God who carries it on: "it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

A helper within

The new creation is not only a new standing; it comes with a new capability. Along with the free gift of righteousness, God gives the free gift of holy spirit. Peter told the crowd at Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the holy spirit" (Acts 2:38).[10] This is in part what Ezekiel foresaw: "I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:27). His vision looks ahead to the end, when God's people will have new hearts in full. The gift given now is a first installment of that promise; Paul calls it a "guarantee" of what is still to come (2 Corinthians 5:5).

Because this spirit comes from God, it is holy by nature. It is at home with what is right, and it works toward what is right in the one who receives it.

Jesus called it a "helper" (John 14:16). The Greek word, *paraklētos* (pah-RAH-klay-tos), describes one called alongside to help. It is help that was not there before. Jesus said it would teach his disciples and remind them of what he had said (John 14:26), and guide them into the truth (John 16:13). Paul adds that "all who are led by the spirit of God are sons of God" (Romans 8:14). The righteousness we could not produce by trying harder (section 3), God now helps us live.

The help is meant to be used. Paul's instruction is simple: "walk by the spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). To walk by the spirit is to follow its leading day by day, rather than the old desires that pull the other way (Galatians 5:17).

The result is fruit: "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23). Some of this fruit benefits the one who bears it: joy, peace, self-control. Much of it reaches others: love, patience, kindness, gentleness,

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[10] Where "spirit" refers to the gift God gives, it is printed in lowercase here, including in quotations, although the ESV capitalizes it. Where it refers to God Himself, it is capitalized.

faithfulness. Paul calls it “the fruit of righteousness” (Philippians 1:11). What the spirit grows inside shows up outside.

So being right inside is not self-improvement. It is the work God begins in those He has put right, and it follows the order of section 3: standing first, then a changed heart.

A heart that keeps being renewed

This inner change is real, but it is not finished all at once. Paul urges believers to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2), which is ongoing. Even those who have been put right still need to have their hearts searched and corrected.

David’s prayer is a good one to keep: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalms 139:23–24).

From inside to outside

What is inside does not stay inside. “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good” (Luke 6:45). A right heart shows itself in right conduct and right relationships. That is the subject of the next section.

5. Right Outside

A right heart does not stay hidden. Section 4 ended with Jesus’s words: “The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good” (Luke 6:45). This section looks at what that good looks like.

Right toward someone

One of the most revealing uses of “righteous” in the Bible comes from an unlikely story. Judah, one of Jacob’s sons, had failed to keep his family obligation to his widowed daughter-in-law, Tamar. When the matter came to light, Judah admitted, “She is more righteous than I” (Genesis 38:26).

Tamar was hardly a model of conduct in the story. But in the matter between them, she was in the right and he was not. That is what “righteous” often means in Scripture: not flawless, but in the right toward someone, faithful to what the relationship requires. It is the question from section 1 again: right toward whom?

Right in concrete ways

Scripture does not leave righteousness vague. Ezekiel describes a righteous man by what he actually does (Ezekiel 18:5–9):

- He does not worship idols.
- He does not defile his neighbor's wife.
- He does not oppress anyone, and he returns what a debtor gave him as a pledge.
- He does not rob.
- He gives bread to the hungry and clothes the naked.
- He does not lend at interest or profit from another's need.
- He judges fairly between people.
- He walks in God's statutes and keeps his rules.

Then comes the verdict: "he is righteous; he shall surely live" (Ezekiel 18:9). Notice how ordinary the list is: worship, marriage, money, food, clothing, fairness. Righteousness shows up in the daily business of life.

Right within God's people

In the Old Testament, these commands were given to Israel, God's covenant people, and they shaped life within that community. The prophets called Israel back to them:

- "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).
- "Seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:17).

The law's commands to generosity centered on "your brother," a fellow Israelite: "you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him" (Deuteronomy 15:7–8). The stranger living among them was included too: "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34).

The family first

The book of Acts shows the same pattern in the early church. The first outward expression of the believers' new life was directed toward one another:[11]

- "All who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44–45).
- "There was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34).

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[11] The term "one another" occurs often in the Church Epistles (Romans–Thessalonians). There are actually three books called "One Anothering" (Volumes 1, 2, and 3). The epistles really focus on living together as a body rather than evangelism.

- When some widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, the church appointed men to see that they were cared for (Acts 6:1–6).
- When famine came, "the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea" (Acts 11:29).

The letters state the priority plainly. Paul writes, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). James and John measure love by how believers treat a brother or sister in need:

- "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?" (James 2:15–16).
- "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17–18).

This care within the family is itself a witness. Jesus said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).[12]

Then to everyone

The priority is not a limit. Paul's "especially" comes after "everyone": "let us do good to everyone" (Galatians 6:10). Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan in answer to the question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:29–37), and he went further still: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). Paul prayed that believers would "increase and abound in love for one another and for all" (1 Thessalonians 3:12).

The family comes first; the door is open to all.

Faith that shows

All of this follows from the order of section 3. We are not put right by our conduct. But those who have been put right will show it.

- "Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:17).
- "Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous" (1 John 3:7).
- "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

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[12] In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus says that what was done for "one of the least of these my brothers" was done for him (25:40). Readers differ on who "my brothers" are. Many take it to mean Jesus's followers, since he uses "brothers" for his disciples elsewhere (Matthew 12:49–50; 28:10). Others read it as anyone in need. Either way, the passage shows that how we treat others is how we treat him.

That last verse fits with Jesus's warning in section 4 against doing good "in order to be seen" (Matthew 6:1). The difference is the aim. Good works done for our own reputation are a front. Good works that point others to God are the outside matching the inside.

Summing up

Righteousness is not a private virtue. It faces outward: toward God, and from there toward others, beginning with the household of faith and extending to everyone. It shows up in ordinary things: how we speak, spend, work, and treat those who depend on us.

That brings up a question many readers will have heard in the public conversation: is this what people mean by "social justice"? The next section takes that up.

What About "Social Justice"?

Anyone who reads the news or listens to sermons will have heard the phrase "social justice." It borrows the Bible's own word, and after section 5 a reader might reasonably ask: is this what Scripture means by justice and righteousness?

The honest answer is that it depends on what a person means by the phrase, because it means quite different things to different people.

One phrase, several meanings

- **Its origin.** The term was coined in the 1840s by an Italian Jesuit priest, Luigi Taparelli, who drew on the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas. He used it for ordinary justice applied to how a society is ordered. In 1931 Pope Pius XI made it part of official Catholic social teaching.[13]
- **Political philosophy.** From the 1970s, especially after John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, the phrase became associated with fairness in how a society distributes goods and opportunities.
- **Current activism.** Today it often refers to a wide range of causes involving race, economics, sexuality, the environment, and more. Some critics connect this use to "critical theory," which views society mainly in terms of oppressor and oppressed groups.
- **Everyday church use.** Many churchgoers who use the phrase simply mean caring for the poor and opposing racism and mistreatment.

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[13] On the history of the phrase, see "The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About Social Justice" (The Gospel Coalition). Taparelli's work influenced Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), and Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) formally adopted the term.

Because one phrase carries all of these meanings, two people can use it and mean very different things. It is always fair to ask, "What do you mean by that?"

What Scripture plainly says

Whatever one thinks of the phrase, Scripture has a great deal to say about justice in community life, and most Christians agree on these texts:

- God "loves righteousness and justice" (Psalms 33:5).
- Justice includes honest dealing: true weights and measures (Proverbs 11:1), wages paid on time (Deuteronomy 24:14–15; James 5:4), and leaving the edges of the harvest for the poor (Leviticus 19:9–10).
- God's people are to speak up for the vulnerable: "Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:9).
- The prophets condemned not only individual wrongs but unjust laws: "Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice" (Isaiah 10:1–2).
- Justice is impartial in both directions: "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:15; see Exodus 23:3, 6).
- Wrong begins in the human heart, not only in systems: "the hearts of the children of man are full of evil" (Ecclesiastes 9:3; see Mark 7:21–23 and section 4).

Where Christians disagree

Christians who take Scripture seriously agree that God's people must care for the poor and oppose wrongdoing. Where they differ is mainly over who is responsible for it.

- **Some emphasize individual responsibility.** They note that Scripture's commands about the poor were largely addressed to individuals, families, and God's people: the landowner left the edges of his own field for gleaners (Leviticus 19:9–10), each person is to provide for his own household (1 Timothy 5:8), and the church cares for its own (Acts 4:34; Galatians 6:10).
- **Others emphasize society and government instituting care.** They point to the prophets' rebukes of unjust laws (Isaiah 10:1–2) and to God's charge to Judah's king to "do justice and righteousness" (Jeremiah 22:3), and they see in these a call for public institutions to secure fair treatment and provision.

The label itself is also debated. Some Christians use "social justice" freely; others, such as the signers of the 2018 *Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel*, avoid it as carrying secular assumptions.

Starting with the heart

Whatever place laws and institutions have, Scripture's order begins with the individual heart. Section 4 showed why: "from within, out of the heart of man" come the wrongs that damage others (Mark 7:21–23). Unjust laws are written by people with unjust hearts (Isaiah 10:1–2).

Law alone cannot fix that. Even God's own law, holy as it was, could not make people righteous: "if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law" (Galatians 3:21; see Romans 3:20). That is why the prophets looked forward to a law written not on stone but on the heart (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26). If God's law written on stone could not produce righteousness, human legislation will not either.

There is a further problem. When governments legislate what is to be considered "good," they may well be defining right by a human standard, which is exactly the problem section 2 described. A society, like an individual, can "call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20), and laws can be written to enforce it.

The New Testament gives civil rulers a real but limited role. Peter describes the emperor and governors as sent "to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good" (1 Peters 2:13–14). Believers are to pray for "kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way" (1 Timothy 2:1–2). But restraining evil is not the same as producing righteousness. Jesus said plainly, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36).

The Gospels show where lasting change comes from. When Zacchaeus, a dishonest tax collector, met Jesus, no law compelled him. Yet he said, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). A changed heart did what no regulation had done. Right outside followed right inside.

Testing it by the standard

This study cannot settle every policy debate. But the questions it has followed give a way to test any claim about justice, whatever label is attached:

- **Right by whose standard?** (section 2) Is justice being defined by God's character and word, or by some other framework, including a government's?
- **Who measures up?** (section 3) Does the view recognize that everyone, on every side of every issue, needs to be put right by God?
- **Right inside, then outside?** (sections 4 and 5) Does it begin with the individual heart, or does it expect laws and institutions to produce what only a changed heart can?
- **Right toward whom?** Does it seek what is right toward everyone involved, the poor and the powerful alike (Leviticus 19:15)?

Summing up

Biblical righteousness does have a social side. Scripture will not let it stay private, and section 5 showed how concretely it reaches into daily life and community. But it begins with the individual heart put right by God, not with legislation defining what is good. Whether a particular use of "social justice" lines up with Scripture depends on what is meant by it, and the measure is the one set out in section 2: not the self, not the culture, not the state, but God Himself.

6. Closing: Making It Right

Section 1 began with four everyday uses of the word "right": the right answer, being in the right, doing the right thing, and making it right. The first three have been the subject of this study: God's standard (section 2), being put right (section 3), and living right inside and out (sections 4 and 5). The sixth remains.

When we have wronged someone, we try to make it right. Scripture's last word on righteousness is that God will make all things right.

God's righteousness comes to the rescue

We tend to think of righteousness only as a measuring line, something that exposes what is crooked. It is that. But again and again, Scripture describes God's righteousness as something that rescues:

- "I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay" (Isaiah 46:13).
- "My righteousness draws near, my salvation has gone out" (Isaiah 51:5).
- "The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations" (Psalms 98:2).

In these verses righteousness and salvation stand side by side. God shows that He is right by keeping His promises and setting things right for His people.

Begun, but not yet finished

That work has already begun. Those who trust God have been put right with Him (section 3), and He has begun to make them right inside (section 4). But no honest believer would claim the work is complete. Paul himself wrote, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on" (Philippians 3:12).

The world around us is not finished either. Wrongs go unpunished, the innocent suffer, and much that is crooked is never made straight. Paul describes creation itself as "groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now" (Romans 8:22).

The day of making right

Scripture promises that this will not go on forever. God "has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed" (Acts 17:31). "He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness" (Psalms 96:13).

That day brings the story full circle. In the garden, right after the first wrong, God spoke to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The picture is figurative: a wound to the heel is painful but not final, while a crushed head is the end. From the beginning, God declared that Satan's dominance in the world would not last. Paul echoes the promise: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet" (Romans 16:20). What was promised in Genesis is completed on the day of making right.

For those who have been wronged, this is good news. Every injustice that human courts missed, every wrong that was never acknowledged, will be set right by the one Judge who cannot be mistaken or bribed. "He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday" (Psalms 37:6).

And beyond judgment lies restoration: "according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:13). God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (Revelation 21:4). Isaiah describes what that will be like: "the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever" (Isaiah 32:17).

Living now in light of then

This final hope shapes how we live in the meantime. Because the final making-right is God's work, we are spared two errors. We need not despair when wrongs persist, because they will not have the last word. And we need not imagine that any human program, however well-meant, will bring about a perfectly right world. That belongs to God alone.

What we are called to do is live now as people who belong to that coming world: put right with God, being made right inside, and doing what is right toward others, beginning with the household of faith and extending to everyone.

The whole picture

The study has followed one simple word through Scripture:

- **Right:** an everyday word that carries more than we notice (section 1).
- **By whose standard?** Not the self, not the culture, not the state, but God Himself (section 2).

- **Who measures up?** No one on their own, but God puts people in the right as a gift (section 3).
- **Right inside:** a heart made new and kept undivided (section 4).
- **Right outside:** right conduct toward others, beginning with God's people (section 5).
- **Making it right:** God's final work of setting all things right (section 6).

And underneath it all, one question: right toward whom? Toward God first, and from there toward everyone else.

Jesus summed up where to begin: "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).