

Lesson 4: Justice 1

Or: Our Obligations to God and Neighbor

We hear about justice a lot in our culture. We hear discussions over legal justice systems, or what constitutes a just war, or a just societal order. We hear phrases like “just cause,” “just deserts,” and “just wage.” (We also hear phrases like “just in time” and “just kidding,” but those phrases have nothing to do with our present discussion, so why even bring them up?)

If you asked a group of people what the idea of “justice” conjured up in their minds, most would probably tell you it made them think of a criminal getting punished. This is a sadly limited and negative conception of justice. The classical understanding, by contrast, held up justice as that noble virtue by which *we to give others what is their due*. The just person is always sure to fulfill his obligations towards everyone. He sees to it that he does not withhold what rightly belongs to another.

The Basis of Justice

The notion of giving others what is their due begs a question: How is it that someone can have something which is their due? How can someone say: “I am owed this, I have a right to this”? Notice too that only certain things have rights, not others. No one owes anything to a rock; there is nothing that belongs to a tree by right. Merely material things do not make claims on us, and therefore they do not enter into questions of justice.¹ This is a critical point in understanding justice, namely, that only persons deserve justice. That’s why whenever one group wants to commit an injustice against another group, the perpetrators usually rationalize their crimes by denying that the victims are really persons. For example, slave owners and slave traders would always present blacks as sub-human. Nazis used the same tactic to justify their horrific treatment of the Jews. And just in case we are tempted to think we belong to a civilization which has progressed beyond such absurd and evil arguments, what is the standard defense for the modern practice of abortion? Usually something to the effect that the fetus, the infant in the womb, isn’t really a person.

All human beings, however, were created by God with a spiritual soul, in order to be in His image and likeness. This is why human beings must be treated justly, because of their special stature in relation to God. As the *Declaration of Independence* states, “They are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable Rights,” and these rights must be taken seriously. The American Founding Fathers recognized this essential truth: that God is the source of human rights, and that justice depends on recognizing His unique love and gifts to humanity. If we see the human person merely as a random collection of atoms, instead of as a child of God, we will not be able to maintain justice. This is why, historically, whenever a society attempted to rid itself of God and religion, the stage was instantly set for widespread injustice. Divinity is the safeguard of justice.

Justice and Relationship

Justice is the virtue which is primarily concerned with the *other*. This is what makes justice so important, and the reason why it comes right after prudence in the order of primacy. With justice, we don’t just realize our own private good, but are also enabled

¹ Note: this is why “animal rights” is a very confusing and imprecise term.

to cultivate the good of relationships. Because it focuses on other persons, it is a broader, more-encompassing virtue than Fortitude and Temperance, which focus primarily on the self.

Justice is therefore absolutely essential if we want to be happy. Without it we will fail in building relationships with those around us, and what is more pitiful, more miserable, than a human being left only with himself? Such a person is trapped and stifled within the narrow limits of himself; he is self-enclosed, lonely, and unfulfilled. The philosopher Plato, recognizing the unhappiness of unjust persons, declared that the one who commits injustice is more to be pitied than the one who suffers injustice.² The just man, by contrast, has healthy, properly ordered relationships with others, and so has many avenues of escaping his solitude and emptiness, enjoying the goods of friendship and society.

Now there are three different kinds of relationship which justice promotes: relationship with *God*, relationships with *individuals*, and relationships with *societies*. These are the various “others” to whom we must give what is due. This lesson will focus on the first of these two groups, while the next lecture will deal with the third aspect of justice, or “social justice.”

Justice to God

Justice concerns what we owe to others, so the question at this point becomes, what do we owe to God? Well, quite obviously, we owe Him everything! He has given us our very life, our existence, our salvation, and all our other blessings. So right from the beginning, we can never attain to a level of pure justice with God, because we can never repay our massive debt to Him. “Man can never say to God: we are even.”³

Nonetheless, we still have an obligation to at least pay back what we can. This means giving God all that we are – our body, soul, and spirit – and all that we have. This is simply a matter of justice, or rather, less than justice, since we can never do for God what He has done for us. Still, we must try to make our little offering to Him in humility. As Our Lord said, “When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done only what we were obliged to do.’”⁴

Therefore, it is only just to obey God, to thank Him, to worship Him. St. Thomas states that religion is strictly speaking a matter of justice. Isn’t it odd how we never think of it in those terms? Yet the fact remains that we are obliged to try and please Him with everything that we do, and follow all the directions He has given for our lives. One facet of striving for justice with God is the practice of tithing. Sadly, this aspect of justice is often lacking from the lives of many believers. They forget that God is entitled to a portion of our earnings, that our relationship with Him demands a financial offering as well as an offering of every other dimension of our lives. The word “tithing” literally means “a tenth part,” and practically, it is usually best to give at least ten percent of our income to God, through donations to the Church or to some other holy cause. (Note: ideally, tithing should be given anonymously and without any hopes of materially benefiting the giver).

² Plato, *Gorgias*

³ Pieper, *The Cardinal Virtues*, 105.

⁴ Lk 17:10.

Again, this is not a question of preference, or “going the extra mile.” We owe all this to God. It’s not even justice; after all He’s done for us, it’s the least we can do. But it’s still an act of great injustice against God if we fail to glorify Him, thank Him, and follow His precepts. It’s unjust for us to take His name in vain, since to do so does not render to God the veneration owed Him. It is an act of injustice if we do not keep holy the Lord’s day, as He has asked. This is why the Catholic Church still teaches that freely and deliberately missing Mass on Sunday is a mortal sin. What a crime of injustice it is, after all God has given us, to deny Him the weekly hour and a half we owe Him!

Justice to Individuals

What does it take to develop and encourage good relationships with other persons? Another way of asking this question is, “What do I owe my neighbor?” Surely, there are many things we owe to our neighbors, many things to which they have a right. Let’s look at just a few of them.

Innocent persons have a right to their lives. *Murder* is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Before engaging in any sexual activity, our partner has a right to a full, personal commitment, which can only take place through marriage. *Fornication* and *adultery* is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Persons have a right to certain material possessions. *Theft* or *swindling* is the violation of that right. (Note: this includes any kind of scam, where profit for one party depends on the loss of another party).

Others have a right to a good name, a good reputation. *Gossip* or *slander* is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Everyone has the right to be treated courteously. *Rudeness* is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Each person has the right to be respected. *Malicious mockery* (that is, to make fun of someone with the purpose of belittling him) is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Persons have the right to their spiritual dignity, that is, to be appreciated for their full personal value (as opposed to being treated as a merely physical object). *Pornography* is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Others have the right to our good example. *Scandal* is the violation of that right, and so is unjust.

Others have the right to truth. *Lying* is the violation of that right, and so it is unjust.

Of course, there are many more kinds of injustice than those listed here: in our pursuit of the virtue of justice, it is beneficial to consider which kinds of injustice most characterize our dealings with others, in order that we may more effectively root them out. Remember, justice and injustice aren’t simply about rules and rule-breaking. They’re about being able to form and sustain genuine community with the people in our lives. Only once we realize this fact will we be able to rid our lives of the various impediments to justice.

Justice and Mercy

As most people realize, justice and mercy are distinct realities, yet few understand the profound link between the two. One person who did understand this link was the late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, who stated that mercy “reveals the perfection of justice.”⁵ What then is the difference and connection between these two attributes? Actually, the difference is easy to articulate: Justice means *to give others what we owe them*, whereas Mercy means *to give others more than what we owe them*.

Yet justice is not enough for relationships to thrive; mercy is required for social interaction to function. This is evident from the fact that we all owe and are owed more than can be paid back. For example, we all owe our parents our life, and there is nothing so precious as life which could be given to balance out that debt. Or take a starving person in need of food; whatever we give that person, he will be unable to pay us back. But in these cases, as in many others, generosity (i.e., mercy), is necessary for the preservation of the good of proper relationships (which, as we saw, is one of the goods we must pursue in order to be happy). Therefore, the virtue of justice must be complimented by mercy in dealings with our neighbor.

Further, as our faith teaches us, there could be no justice without mercy. After all, if God hadn’t created human beings – which was more than He owed us (i.e., mercy) – then there wouldn’t be any issues of human justice, since humans wouldn’t even exist! And if He hadn’t come down from Heaven to redeem us – which was also more than He owed us (i.e., mercy) – then we’d never have been freed from the slavery of sinful injustice. This shows us that God’s mercy comes before and goes far beyond his justice.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always been merciful to humanity, most especially when the Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate and died in order to restore the proper relationship between God and man. We are expected to do the same: we must go beyond the strict limits of justice and be generous, merciful, and forgiving. Divine mercy is to be our model, as the parable of the Unmerciful servant so eloquently expresses. “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Every Christian must give to others more than they are owed if he would follow Christ’s commandments. In the words of the Gospel: “You have heard that it was said, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your cheek, turn the other one to him as well. If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. Should anyone press you into service for mile, go with him for two miles. Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.”⁶ The devoted disciple of Our Lord will never be satisfied with mere justice; he will recognize the need to go further and delve into mercy.

Justice and Love

An important distinction must also be made between justice and love. The distinction lies in the fact that justice deals with our neighbor; justice makes us fulfill our obligations to others. To put it simply, justice tells *me* what I have to do for *you*. In love, however, we join others to ourselves, we unite with them so that their happiness becomes identical with our own. In love, it’s not about *me* and *you*: it’s about *us*.

⁵ *Dives et Misericordia*, 8.

⁶ Mt 5:38-42; C.f. Lk 6:27-38.

So when we love someone, we don't talk about what we owe that person, or about the obligations to that person in justice. The notions of obligation, debt, or duty do not enter into the mind-frame of love, for with love there is only a willing and cheerful desire to serve the beloved. If, for instance, a man truly loves a woman, he won't think, "What do I owe her?" Rather, he'll think, "How can I make her happy?" because her happiness has been united to his happiness, in such a way that the two are inseparable.

This is our goal in dealing with God and neighbor; we should try to go beyond justice. We need to try and get beyond thinking in terms of debt and obligation, and arrive at the point where we value God's happiness before all else, and value our neighbor's happiness as much as our own. This is the ultimate goal, the goal of love. We will speak more about the meaning of love in the class on Charity.