DOING JUSTICE AND PREACHING GRACE
Tim Keller

(NOTE: Quoted Scriptures included after the chapter.)

As Christians do justice, they must face the important practical issue of how justice relates to their other duties as believers. In particular, what is the relationship between the call to help the needy and the Biblical command to evangelize?

Some have argued that Christians should only do justice as a means to the end of evangelism. That is, we should do mercy and justice only because it helps us bring people to faith in Christ. This does not seem to fit in with Jesus’s Good Samaritan parable and his charge not to give to needy people in order to get something in return (Luke 6: 32-35). Though Jesus has in view people who can repay us financially, the basic principle is that we are not to give expecting gratitude (verse 32). If we only help people who are responding to the gospel, we will be perceived as only helping others in order to help ourselves, namely, to increase our own numbers.

On the other hand, there are many who insist that doing justice is spreading the gospel, it is evangelism they say. Doing justice can indeed lead people to give the message of gospel grace a hearing, but to consider deeds of mercy and justice to be identical to gospel proclamation is a fatal confusion. I propose a different way to understand evangelism and social justice. They should exist in an asymmetrical, inseparable relationship.

Evangelism is the most basic and radical ministry possible to a human being. This is true not because the spiritual is more important than the physical, but because the eternal is more important than the temporal. In 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18 Paul speaks of the importance of strengthening the “inner man” even as the outer, physical nature is aging and decaying. If there is a God, and if life with him for eternity is based on having a saving relationship with him, then the most loving thing anyone can do for one’s neighbor is help him or her to a saving faith in that God.

But, as we have seen, doing justice is inseparably connected to preaching grace. This is true in two ways. One way is that the gospel produces a concern for the poor. The other is that deeds of justice gain credibility for the preaching of the gospel. In other words, justification by faith leads to doing justice, and doing justice can make many seek to be justified by faith.

In the book of Acts, we see this dynamic illustrated. In Acts 2 the descent of the Holy Spirit and the disciples’ encounter with God led to radical sharing with the needy (verse 44-45). There was no reason that the church “grew in favor with all the people” (verse 47). The experience of salvation led to generosity to the poor, which led to more people becoming open to the message of salvation. In Acts 4 we read, similarly, that the economic sharing of the people inside the church lent great power to the preaching of the resurrection to those outside the church (Acts 4: 32-35). Finally, in Acts 6, after the ministry of diakonia is more firmly established, Luke adds: “So the word of God spread.
The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (verse 7). The word “so” indicates a cause-effect relationship. This sharing of resources across class lines—between the “needy” and those wealthy enough to have property to sell—was extremely rare in the Greco-Roman world. The practical actions of Christians for people in need was therefore striking to observers and made them open to the gospel message. The Roman emperor Julian despised the Christian faith, but he candidly admitted that Christianity was constantly gaining new converts because believers’ generosity to the poor made it so attractive.

Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers . . . the impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well.

I urge my readers to discern the balance I am seeking to strike. If we confuse evangelism and social justice, we lose what is the single most unique service that Christians can offer the world. Others, alongside believers, can feed the hungry. But Christians have the gospel of Jesus by which men and women can be born again into the certain hope of eternal life. No one else can make such an invitation. However, many Christians who care intensely about evangelism see the work of doing justice as a distraction for Christians that detracts from the mission of evangelism. That is also a grave error.

Imagine an eloquent Christian preacher who every Sunday delivers compelling sermons. But one of his female parishioners comes to learn that the minister verbally abuses and browbeats his wife daily. After she discovers this, she unsurprisingly finds his sermons completely unpersuasive. Why? His deeds contradict his words, and so his words have no power. Imagine instead a new minister whose public oratory is quite mediocre. However, as time goes on, the parishioners come to see that he is a man of sterling character, wisdom, humility, and love. Soon, because of the quality of his life, his members will find that they are hanging on every word of his preaching.

When a city perceives a church as existing strictly and only for itself and its own members, the preaching of that church will not resonate with outsiders. But if neighbors see church members loving their city through astonishing, sacrificial deeds of compassion, they will be much more open to the church’s message. Deeds of mercy and justice should be done out of love, not simply as a means to the end of evangelism. And yet there is no better way for Christians to lay a foundation for evangelism than by doing justice.

It is also impossible to separate word and deed ministry from each other in ministry because human beings are integrated wholes—body and soul. When some Christians say, “Caring for physical needs will detract from evangelism,” they must be thinking only of doing evangelism among people who are comfortable and well-off. The London City Mission is a nearly two-hundred-year-old evangelical mission that seeks to do evangelism among the urban poor of London. Though evangelism is its central purpose, this is done through relationship, visitation, and friendship. Its mission is: the same person, going to the same people, regularly, to become their friend for Jesus’s sake. Because of this mission, LCM missionaries run neither large-scale evangelism nor social programs. Instead “word” and “deed” are seamlessly integrated in their ministry. Helping their
neighbors with their children’s educational needs, or with finding jobs or learning English as a second language, goes hand-in-hand with sharing their faith verbally. On paper, we may ask, “Should Christians do evangelism or social justice?” But in real life, these things go together.

Christians who live or work in needy communities in order to do evangelism must inevitably become involved in helping their friends and neighbors with their pressing economic and social needs. To fail to do so is simply a lack of love. It is also impractical. If you wish to share your faith with needy people, and you do nothing about the painful conditions in which they live, you will fail to show them Christ’s beauty. We must neither confuse evangelism with doing justice, nor separate them from one another.

**Quoted Scriptures:**


32 “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18 (NIV)**

16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

**Acts 2:44-47 (NIV)**

44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. 46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

**Acts 4:32-35 (NIV)**

32 All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.
Acts 6:1-7 (NIV)

1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews[a] among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.