

Justice/ Righteousness (Systematic Theology)

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The theme of justice and righteousness, as both God's and human justice and righteousness, plays a central role in the biblical writings and shapes the Christian understanding of justice and righteousness. While this theme was often interpreted in the past primarily in relation to the forgiveness of the individual's sins through God's merciful righteousness, God's justice is today increasingly understood also as God's justice-establishing action in history and related to the practice of justice among believers. In light of the injustices of the world, justice and righteousness remain central to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as well.

This article is a translation from the German; the original term *Gerechtigkeit* like the Greek term *dikaiosyne*, encompasses both *justice* and *righteousness*. The translation therefore renders the term according to context, using *justice* where social, relational, legal, restorative, and liberative dimensions are foregrounded, and *righteousness* where soteriological, Pauline, christological, or justificatory dimensions are at issue. The theological interrelation between *justice* and *righteousness* is crucial for understanding the argument of this article, since the German term *Gerechtigkeit* holds together dimensions that English often separates: God's saving and justifying righteousness, God's justice-establishing action in history, and the corresponding practice of justice among human beings.

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Editorial Note

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1. Introduction: Justice in a World Full of Injustice

It is difficult to overlook the fact that the world today is a world full of injustices, and these injustices seem to be deepening at an ever-increasing pace. Virtually every crisis or challenge of our globalized existence can be traced back to injustices or results in them. It is precisely among those who suffer from these injustices that the call for justice, the longing for a just order of life for all, grows loud; moreover, churches^[1] and committed Christians all over the world feel called to advocate for justice. Yet the question of justice is by no means a matter of the present alone, as a look at the history of philosophy and Christian theology – with its roots in the world of the ancient Near East and antiquity – shows. Even here “justice emerges as a central theme and a key driving force behind reflections on God, humanity, the world, and their mutual relationship.”^[2] When it comes to justice as a fundamental concept of theology,^[3] the issue is not merely our understanding of justice and its standards, but crucially also our *understanding of God*: God is a God who is just and loves justice (Ps 11:7).

2. The Concept of Justice in Antiquity and the Bible

2.1. Justice as the Blind Lady Justitia?

First, it is worth taking a look at a familiar image of justice: the Roman goddess Justitia, blindfolded (i.e., without regard to the person) and holding a scale in one hand, dispenses to each person what is due them according to the ancient principle “*suum cuique*.”^[4] Thus, everyone receives exactly what they deserve; human justice seems possible according to this principle. With the sword in her other hand, Justitia also ensures that this principle is carried out. Her justice is a *punitive justice*. This establishes an understanding of law that proceeds from the *equality* of all human beings in their diversity and demands the impartiality of the judiciary – an important protective instrument especially for those who lack money, power, or influence. This understanding of justice dates back to ancient Greece, where it served as a *guiding principle* for the lives of individuals and the entirety of existence.^[5] For Plato ^{GND} (ca. 427–347 BCE), for example, justice denotes not only the highest virtue, but also a “state of good order.”^[6] However, this leaves a crucial question unanswered: if everyone receives what they deserve, by what criteria are individuals judged? By their merits or by their needs?

2.2. Justice as a Recurring Theme in the Bible^[7]

2.2.1. God’s Saving Justice in the Old Testament

As familiar as the image of blind Justitia may be as the epitome of justice, it does not even come close to capturing the full range of biblical concepts of justice. Justice is such a central theme in both Testaments that it can even be described as the “red thread”^[8] of the biblical books and the “Leitmotiv of the theology of the Old Testament.”^[9] Although conceptions of justice differ across the books of the Old Testament, one can nevertheless speak of a *single* concept of justice, in that it “always describes a relationship that is oriented toward God, established by God, and – even in the realm of human relations – is to be shaped by God.”^[10] A central concept of justice, one that has been revived in contemporary theology, is “an act [of God] that does indeed take the person into account, namely, a partisan, solidarity-based commitment to the weak, who must be helped to obtain their rights.”^[11] The Hebrew term for justice, *z’daka*, does not evoke the image of a detached, deliberating God, but rather that of a judge (cf. art.

Judgment) and savior, and of his *saving justice*.^[12] Justice is not merely one of God's many attributes, but is understood in the biblical books as the "*central* definition of God's essence":^[13] "Without justice, God would not be God."^[14] At the same time, however, God's justice cannot be understood apart from God's mercy. Rather, "God's justice proves to be an aspect of his mercy and this, in turn, consists in resolutely taking of sides with the victims."^[15] God does not keep God's merciful justice to Godself, but bestows it upon human beings, who are called to practice justice among themselves. Justice is thus simultaneously a relational reality, a gift, and a task;^[16] a concept that finds its expression in a special way in the central motif of the covenant, *berit*: God establishes the covenant with the people of Israel not on the basis of their merits or qualities, but on the basis of God's love and faithfulness (Deut 7:6–9), and in this covenant, people are called to live out justice. This *human* justice, which corresponds to God's justice, is a relational and dynamic justice; it consists in "living faithfulness to the community."^[17] At the same time, the concept of the covenant presupposes an asymmetrical relationship between God as the giver and sustainer of justice.^[18] For it is God's justice that underlies all human attempts to live justly; humanity continually needs God's merciful and forgiving justice. In summary, it can be stated that justice here is to be understood theologically in three dimensions: (1) as an attribute of God, (2) in the relationship between God and humanity, and (3) as interpersonal justice.^[19]

2.2.2. God's Righteousness as a Gift of Salvation in the New Testament

This red thread is also taken up in the New Testament: righteousness is of particular central importance both to Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God (see, e.g., Matt 6:33) and to Paul's ^{GND} understanding of justification. This is first indicated formally by the frequency of the term *dikaiosyne* (righteousness or lawfulness), particularly in the Gospel of Matthew and in Paul's epistles (especially in the epistle to the Romans). For the history of the church and theology, it should be noted that the concept of *dikaiosyne*, which subsequently became central to the Christian understanding of righteousness, stands in Greek thought rather for the idea of legality, righteousness, or proper nature, so that the literal Old Testament-Jewish sense of righteousness as a *gift of salvation* recedes into the background in later times.^[20] Even though the diverse conceptions of justice in the New Testament cannot be summarized in a single term, certain key themes can be identified that correspond to the three-dimensional understanding mentioned above: (1) God's very nature is justice and righteousness. (2) In the gospel, righteousness is revealed as God's faithfulness to the covenant, as a saving and judging power and as a gift that places people in a salvific relationship with God.^[21] God's salvific action and salvific faithfulness are revealed first and foremost in Jesus Christ: in him the new covenant is established; in his death, God not only takes upon himself sin and its consequences, but also justifies all who live by faith (Rom 3:21–26). Here, too, God's righteousness is the power that brings salvation and leads into a saving relationship with God. (3) But interpersonal justice also plays a central role in the New Testament: the *act of doing righteousness* places believers alongside those who suffer from injustice and unfairness. Although people are thus called to live as the righteous, it remains clear in the New Testament that perfect justice can (and will) be established only by God, and that justice therefore remains an eschatological concept of hope, even if, as a standard of reference, it already shapes the lives of believers.

3. God's Justice and Righteousness as a Theme in Systematic Theology

3.1. God's Merciful Justice and the Forgiveness of Sins

One of the thinkers who were pivotal to the Western Christian tradition and whose influence extends to the present day was Augustine ^{GND} (354–430), who had a lasting impact on Christian theology through his understanding of God's justice and mercy. Augustine interprets the Bible such that all people are sinners and deserve eternal damnation according to God's justice, thereby following more closely an ancient understanding of retributive justice. At the same time, however, according to Augustine, God, in his mercy, chooses a select group to whom forgiveness of sin is granted as a gift that cannot be lost. The elect cannot actively earn their righteousness before God; it is freely given to them by grace. God alone justifies the ungodly. Anselm of Canterbury ^{GND} (ca. 1033–1109) also attempts to reconcile

God's justice with God's mercy, employing a conceptual framework of his time, namely that of *satisfactio* (satisfaction). Like Augustine, he posits a rupture between God and humanity that can be healed not by human beings, but only by Christ.^[22] Through human injustice(s), sinful humanity offends God's honor and thus owes God satisfaction. But since humanity cannot provide this satisfaction, God becomes human in Jesus Christ and, as a sinless human being, provides satisfaction in this way. Through Christ's sacrifice, both God's justice and God's mercy are satisfied.

3.2. The Merciful God, the Righteousness of Christ, and the Doctrine of Justification

The question of God's righteousness and mercy was also central to the Reformation movements of the sixteenth century. For Martin Luther ^{GND} (1483–1546) in particular, it was precisely this question that revealed the nature of God and of humanity: out of mercy, the gracious God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the sinful believer in a "joyful exchange." The doctrine of justification, which is so central to Reformation theology, developed precisely around the question of the righteousness of God and of humanity. Even for Luther, God's righteousness and mercy are not contradictory but complementary attributes of God. For Luther, the epistle to the Romans was particularly important, specifically Rom 3:28 (a person is justified by faith apart from works); the righteousness of the gracious God is not a punishing righteousness, but a bestowing righteousness. In this context, Reformed theology takes up the motif of the covenant and understands God's righteousness as his faithfulness to the covenant and his will to save. The covenant is understood as the sphere in which divine justice also takes shape among human beings. From a Protestant perspective, Jewish and Roman Catholic doctrines of salvation were often distorted, being inaccurately accused of advocating a concept of salvation based on works-righteousness and merit-based piety.^[23] In contrast, the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," first signed in 1999 by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, states, "We confess together that persons are justified by faith in the gospel 'apart from works prescribed by the law' (Rom 3:28)." ^[24]

3.3. Justice as the Essence of God and as the Praxis of Believers

Liberation theologies, particularly in their Latin American form, focus centrally on God's "justice bringing and liberating" ^[25] actions in history, as found in both the Old and New Testaments. While the Old Testament primarily refers to the exodus, Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God is understood in light of "the life and teaching of Jesus, who stands in the tradition of Israel and embodies that passion for justice that permeates the faith of the Old Testament." ^[26] Against this backdrop, liberation theologies emphasize God's preferential option for the poor and marginalized, and that God's justice is manifested in taking the side of the disadvantaged ("God's preferential option for the poor"). God's justice is thus not an abstract idea, but the very essence of the saving God, revealed in and through history; it takes on even greater significance in today's world, which is rife with injustice, particularly in the call for believers to actively advocate for social justice. God's justice is therefore understood as an alternative to unjust social and economic structures that must be criticized and transformed; it aims at comprehensive liberation and the practice of love of neighbor, encompassing spiritual as well as social, political, and economic dimensions. In contrast to a tendency in Protestant theology to consider God's justice exclusively in the context of the justification of the individual believer, the Presbyterian theologian Elsa Tamez ^{GND} emphasizes in her reinterpretation of the doctrine of justification from a Latin American perspective that justification by faith reveals God's justice and solidarity in the practice of Jesus. Through God's justice and righteousness, bestowed upon believers by grace, the marginalized in particular experience that they themselves become the architects of their own history.^[27] Liberation theologies point not only to the central character of God's justice for Christian theology, but also to the fact that the practice of justice has "freed God from his ancient prison" of a meaningless transcendence, thereby making it "the preeminent Christian locus of the experience of God." ^[28]

Even outside the Latin American context, this understanding of God's justice and the practice of justice became a central theological theme in many other liberation theological approaches (such as Black theology,

feminist/womanist/mujerista theologies, Minjung theology, and Palestinian liberation theologies) within their respective contexts.

Postcolonial theologies take up this thread and challenge the dominance of Western conceptions of justice – including God's justice – while emphasizing the need to incorporate other cultural and religious traditions. In light of God's justice that restores what is right, postcolonial theology can emphasize the need for restorative justice that acknowledges historical injustice and seeks to heal it.

3.4. Justice for Perpetrators *and* Victims of Sin

In particular, the liberation theological focus on the victims of sin who suffer under injustices has led to a critical examination of the Reformation's doctrine of justification: "A one-sided restriction to the perpetrators and forgiveness of their active sins has made Protestantism blind to the suffering of the victims and their passive sins and to God's judging and saving "preferential option for the poor'." [29] Jürgen Moltmann  emphasizes accordingly, drawing on biblical traditions, that God's justice executes first and foremost justice for the victims, [30] through which those deprived of rights receive justice before God. In his examination of concepts of atonement from the Christian tradition, Moltmann then turns to "God's justifying righteousness for the perpetrators," [31] which enables them to live a life of righteousness in the presence of their victims and in the face of their own guilt. In summary, it can be stated, "God is righteous because he executes justice for men and women without rights and puts the unjust right." [32] This victim-centered approach has been particularly incorporated into theological engagement with sexualized violence (both within and outside the church) in the search for a justice that brings people to account and establishes righteousness without hasty demands for forgiveness on the part of the victims.

3.5. Justice as a Unifying Theme in Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue

It cannot be overlooked that the issue of justice plays a central role in various forms of theological and ecclesial cooperation, particularly in light of the catastrophic injustices of our globalized present. In ecumenical dialogue between, but also within, denominational families, the question of justice is of interest not only from an ethical perspective; the commitment to combating various forms of injustice is grounded in a biblical image of God that has been brought back to the center of theological discourse through liberation theology. The World Council of Churches' commitment to the preservation of creation and climate justice, for example, is introduced as follows: "The God of the Bible is a God of justice who protects, loves and cares for the most vulnerable among his creatures." [33] In contrast, issues of justice in relation to the doctrine of justification play hardly any role in ecumenical dialogue outside of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* mentioned above. The three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are united by the concept of a God of justice and thus provide an important foundation for exchange and interreligious learning. [34] Beyond this, Christian theology also seeks to bring its understanding of justice – in light of the diverse experiences of injustice – into interreligious dialogue and into dialogue with other disciplines and actors in society.

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- ³ Cf. Gräb-Schmidt, Elisabeth, Gerechtigkeit systematisch-theologisch, in: Witte, Markus (ed.), Gerechtigkeit (Themen der Theologie 6), Stuttgart 2012, 125f.
- ⁴ On this, cf. Horn, Christoph, Geschichte des Gerechtigkeitsbegriffs. Antike und Mittelalter, in: Goppel, Anna et al. (Eds.), Handbuch Gerechtigkeit, Heidelberg 2016, 6–14.
- ⁵ Cf. Gräb-Schmidt, Gerechtigkeit, 128f.
- ⁶ Holzeithner, Elisabeth, Gerechtigkeit. Grundbegriffe der Europäischen Geistesgeschichte, Vienna 2009, 21. German Original: "Zustand des Wohlgeordnetseins."
- ⁷ Wolterstorff, Nicholas, Art. Justice and Rights, in: St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology, 18.05.2023 (<https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/JusticeandRights>), accessed on 13.07.2026, provides a rationale for beginning with biblical concepts of justice.
- ⁸ On this, cf. Dietrich, Walter, Der rote Faden im Alten Testament, EvTh 49 (1989), 232–250, and Ebach, Jürgen, Ein roter Faden in der Bibel. Beobachtungen und Erwägungen zur Gerechtigkeit als biblischer und ethischer Ziel-, Norm- und Praxiskategorie, in: Felder, Matthias/Frettlöh, Magdalene (Eds.), Unsere großen Wörter. Reformatorische ReVisionen (reformiert! 11), Zürich 2022, 15.
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- ¹⁰ Witte, Gerechtigkeit, 61, translation by Jacob N. Cerone. German Original: "immer eine auf Gott bezogene, durch Gott gestiftete und auch im zwischenmenschlichen Bereich von Gott her zu gestaltende Beziehung beschreibt."
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- ¹⁷ Mette, Norbert, Art. *Gerechtigkeit*, in: WiReLex, 2016 (<https://doi.org/10.23768/wirelex.Gerechtigkeit.100209>), accessed on 13.07.2026, 7, translation by Jacob N. Cerone. German Original: "lebendiger Gemeinschaftstreue."
- ¹⁸ Cf. Gräb-Schmidt, *Gerechtigkeit*, 125f.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Welker, *Gerechtigkeit*, 411.
- ²⁰ Cf. Rose, Christian, *Gerechtigkeit* (NT), in: WiBiLex, 2011 (<https://bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/59496/>), accessed on 13.07.2026.
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- ²⁷ Cf. Tamez, Elsa, *Gegen die Verurteilung zum Tod. Paulus oder die Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben aus der Perspektive der Unterdrückten und Ausgeschlossenen*, Luzern 1998, 206–226.
- ²⁸ Aguirre/Cormenzana, *Gerechtigkeit*, 1213, translation by Jacob N. Cerone. German Original: "Gott aus seinem uralten Gefängnis" and "zum vorzüglich christlichen Ort der Gotteserfahrung."
- ²⁹ Moltmann, Jürgen, *Justice for Victims and Perpetrators*, in: idem, *History and the Triune God. Contributions to Trinitarian Theology*, London 1991, 44–56, 46; see here also for what follows.
- ³⁰ Cf. Moltmann, *Justice*, 46.
- ³¹ Moltmann, *Justice*, 48.
- ³² Moltmann, *Justice*, 56.
- ³³ World Council of Churches, *Care for Creation and Climate Justice* (<https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/care-for-creation-and-climate-justice>), accessed on 13.07.2026.
- ³⁴ On this, cf. Kruip, Gerhard, *Religiöse Wurzeln und Perspektiven. Judentum und Christentum*, in: Goppel, Anna et al. (Eds.), *Handbuch Gerechtigkeit*, Heidelberg 2016, 35–41, and Schirrmacher, Christine, *Religiöse Wurzeln und Perspektiven. Islam*, in: Goppel, Anna et al. (Eds.), *Handbuch Gerechtigkeit*, Heidelberg 2016, 41–47.

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