

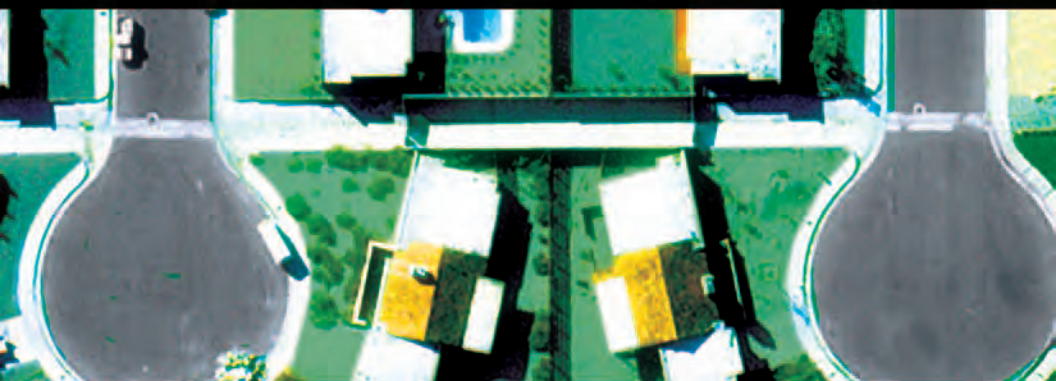


WILL & LISA SAMSON

JUSTICE IN THE

BURBS

BEING THE HANDS OF JESUS WHEREVER YOU LIVE



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INTRODUCTION

Our Story—from Will's Perspective

We failed.

We wanted to say that from the start because questions of success have such huge significance in our culture. It's the dedicated athlete, soldier, or businessman who becomes the motivational speaker. They will give you some formula with three or five or seven steps and tell you they know this success formula works because it worked for them. They may even make some promise as to what they believe their method will do for you.

We cannot do that. We failed to live a life of justice in the suburbs, and this book is, at least in part, our *mea culpa*—our confession of insufficiency.

Ironically, that insufficiency may give us a unique vantage point as storytellers. The contemporary tale of justice seems to be one with few chapters and even fewer happy endings. Perhaps this is why the title alone, *Justice in the Burbs*, gets such a great instant reaction when we mention it to people. We all have this sense that we are to be

participating in writing God's story of love in the world, and yet it can be very difficult to know how, particularly in the suburbs.

Regarding our citizenship in the burbs, we are both insiders and outsiders. We are insiders in the sense that until very recently, we lived all of our lives in that setting. We lived, worked, raised children, and labored in churches, all in the context of the suburbs. We are products of the American suburban experience.

But we have increasingly sensed there is something missing from that experience. This perception of the missing element, and the quest that flowed from it, brought us out of the suburbs and into the city of Lexington, Kentucky, where we now work with various communities of need. So in that sense, we are outsiders. We personally needed to move out of the burbs for a time.

We have begun to see the problem of suburban justice in new ways. If you have seen the movie *The Matrix*, you know there can be objectivity from stepping out of a system and looking in. It is our hope and prayer you will benefit from our vantage point of having lived most of our lives within the suburban matrix and now having the rare opportunity to look back in.

It isn't our intention to tell you our whole story. But it is our intention to speak from our experience. It will be woven throughout the book in the hope that it will be useful as an example.

Somehow, as we became adults, we did not see the story of justice as a part of the story of God. How did that happen? And why?

A chronology of events would not serve to answer the "why" question completely. We could talk about our churches, our parents, our schools, our friends, our communities. All these life elements were formative in who we are and how we think, but they would provide only a part of the answer. Providing those historical details may even

go a long way in answering the “how” question. But it is insufficient to answer the “why” question.

The question of why we came into adulthood with an incomplete understanding of God’s story is more nuanced and involves much deeper questions than we will ask in this book. Part of the answer involves what we were taught about the Bible. We both grew up in churches that emphasized Scripture memory. Yet neither of us can remember ever memorizing a verse about God’s concern for the poor. By the time we left our homes for college, we estimate that we heard more than four thousand sermons between us, and we had attended church or chapel more than any other activity except class. Yet neither of us can remember hearing sermons about God’s concern for those in need during these formative years.

Does God care for the poor and for those left out? Can his care be discovered through reading Scripture? And, if the answer to those questions is yes, why were those truths not part of our spiritual formation? This is one of the questions we will be exploring in the pages to come. We suspect our experience had something to do with the view of God that the people in our churches held.

Before you make assumptions about our families, let us assure you that these were good homes. We attended churches where our parents were active. Our families were engaged in their communities. Our mothers were at home when we got off the bus from school. We had good, religious homes where we were taught the Bible and some notion of our role as Christians in the world.

Yet somehow we grew up with little or no instruction about God’s heartbeat of justice. We received no teaching about those within the church who have fought for and written about justice—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., William Stringfellow, and St. Francis of Assisi, just to name a few. Beyond the Bible, we had little exposure to church history

and the many stories of those who have spoken of and worked for justice as they lived out God's story.

Lisa and I are coming to learn that many writers and workers within the church saw issues of justice as deeply related to their understanding of God. In fact, as we will explore in greater detail later, the detachment of one from the other is a relatively recent phenomenon.

We tend to believe that the way people act privately, publicly, and communally says a lot about who they believe God to be and what they believe God cares about. If someone harms their body with drugs, on some level they have a view of God that is, at the least, insufficient to prevent them from acting in that manner. If someone votes for a particular political candidate, on some level they believe that the candidate will act in ways that are consistent with what they perceive God to care about. And if someone is part of a community that does not speak about or act on issues of justice, they are affirming a belief that God is not interested in a public expression of justice.

I understand the problems of thinking this way, not the least of which is the knowledge that people are simply not that purposeful. You could argue that people often do things in very selfish ways, but they are not driven by a view of God that compels or allows them to act in that manner.

But something does drive each of us, doesn't it? That something can be personal preservation. It can be economic gain. It can be love. It can be hate. It can be fear. But what lies behind *those* values? We believe that beneath those surface values, every person holds a particular view of God and how he would have them act in the world.

The majority of the American church in the twenty-first century preaches a perspective on God that fails to incorporate issues of justice. In this view, God cares for each of us individually and wants to spend eternity with us in heaven. Visit the average American church, suburban or not, on any given Sunday morning. Does the God people

are worshiping have concern for those who find themselves in need? Does the God talked about from the pulpit care about the poor and the marginalized? About how we make and spend our money? About how we steward the resources with which we have been entrusted?

We need a new view of God.

Our Story—from Lisa’s Perspective

All my life I have known that I should be caring for “the least of these,” even though most of my life wasn’t spent in such pursuits at all. Yet I had a legacy to live up to for which I’m thankful. My father, grandfather, and uncle were all optometrists down in South Baltimore. When they were in practice, that neighborhood had yet to be gentrified. The everyday citizen of Baltimore lived around Light Street: shopkeepers, longshoremen, and factory workers, to name a few. Many of them couldn’t afford the glasses and eye care provided them, but as far as I know, a collection notice never went out from Drs. Ebauer, optometrists. Those gracious men provided for the community in which they worked most of their lives, practicing the profession they had given themselves to, caring for the people around them. The funny stories my dad would tell around the supper table, the people he spoke of, still give me cause to smile decades later.

My father rarely complained about the people who failed to pay their bills. I’m sure there were some who took advantage of the Ebauers’ kindness, but that was a small price to pay. The Drs. Ebauer never talked about moving out to a cushy office in the county and charging three times as much for their services. They stayed in South Baltimore until retirement. Though all three men are long gone, they gifted me with the realization that caring for those who find themselves in insurmountable situations is something

we all should do as we go about our lives, utilizing the gifts and talents God has given us.

But as typical professionals in the suburbs, Will and I found our lives consumed by the kids' school, sports, church, and, of course, our careers. We had no time to help out others and felt pretty satisfied with infrequent touches of goodness on our part, thinking on that annual night we cooked for the homeless in our area, "Well, at least I helped tonight. How many other Christians do nothing and don't feel bad about it?"

For us, living a life of justice would eventually take forsaking the suburbs altogether and moving into an urban environment. However, we soon realized there must be another way for suburbanites who don't feel called to relocate but care about issues of justice to live out the commands of Jesus in Matthew 25. And so the idea for this book, *Justice in the Burbs*, was born. The fact that you have picked up this book shows that you care and want to use your own hands and feet.

We pray you will find encouragement and inspiration tucked among these pages. If we as Christians don't care to follow the commands of Jesus, who will? Welcome to the journey. There are plenty of others saving you a seat!

Assumptions

Having made several assumptions in writing this book, we'll be very up-front with them.

1. When we say "God," we are referring to the God honored in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We take the old adage "write what you know" to heart. We speak from the Judeo-Christian tradition because that is who we are. While our examples tend to be from people with a similar view, they are not exclusively

- from the Christian tradition. Gandhi, for example, had much wisdom from which the Christian church can benefit.
2. Despite point number 1, this book addresses issues of justice that people of all faiths can apply. While we will speak from a particular perspective—followers of Jesus talking primarily to other followers of Jesus—we hope this book is written in a way that invites all to follow along.
 3. This is not a how-to book. We hope to provide meaningful dialogue that will encourage people toward a lifestyle of justice. Having said that, we cannot teach you to live justly. We can show you the reasons, give you some principles, and hope that you move toward living a life for others in radical ways.

Book Overview

This book is divided into twelve chapters. Each chapter contains the following elements:

Narrative. All this talk of justice is great, but what does it look like? How does God want us to act? You will follow a fictional family through their journey of questioning and discovery, see their joys and their pains, live through their introduction to following God as a way of justice, and hopefully learn along with them.

I (Lisa) sought to show people we think of as typical suburbanites, Matt and Christine Marshall, as their journey unfolds. While unable to develop character, plot, and themes as I would in a novel, my hope is that within one of these characters you will find a part of yourself, that the questions they ask resonate in your heart, and that their journey will encourage you to make the next step.

Discourse. We desire to give you the reader good reasons to live justly. In addition to the narrative, each chapter

contains a specific discussion of related issues. Our goal is to engage you in many different ways and on multiple levels, to allow you to find different entry points for your journey of living justly in the suburbs.

Meditation. We strongly believe that living justly comes as a result of being tied into Scripture and the writings of various people who have been seeking to live out the story of God through the years. We also have some sense that living justly means being a part of the community of God, so we asked some friends to offer their meditations and reflections in response to the story and the ideas presented in this book. Brian McLaren, Christine Pohl, Leonard Sweet, Luci Shaw, and many others were gracious enough to offer us the gift of their words.

1 LIFE IN AN ORDINARY WORLD

Matt wondered why anybody would give up so much. He pointed to Clifton through the windshield. “I’ll bet he finds himself in the craziest places sometimes,” he said to his wife, Christine. The wiper blades skated full speed across the beaded surface as they waited at a stop-light. He hated rain.

This congested intersection was a prime example. The man worked this intersection every Friday night for as long as they’d lived in the area—at least four years. Matt admired his staying power. He couldn’t imagine begging for money. Well, truthfully, he could. Years ago, he wished his parents would have done so more often. Talk about lean years.

Christine pulled her purse off the floor. “And in this rain. He must be doing something really amazing downtown.”

“I’ll bet his mission’s a rat hole. Clifton must be a saint.”

Tweed hair shorn about an inch away from his brown scalp, Clifton elevated a bucket in one large, knobby hand. In red marker the words “Helping Hands Rescue Mission” advertised his purpose, but his charming, easy-chair smile and the way he pointed at people with the question, “You helping out today? Any bit’ll do!” advertised his persona. Only the lines around his eyes whispered of his age. A little old school, he made it easy

for Matt to imagine him once sauntering down the street as a confident young man. It didn't matter that his shoes looked as if they'd walked back and forth from the mission downtown to this intersection in the suburbs a hundred times or so. It didn't matter that he held a sloppy old sugar bucket up to the windows of shiny motorized toys. Matt suspected Clifton was no fool. He knew the people out here had a little extra money, and he planned to get at least a few of them to help the people at Helping Hands. He'd become rather a folk figure on this humming corner.

On Friday nights, usually the most profitable for him, people celebrated the paycheck in their pocket, ready for a steak dinner and the latest release down at the multiplex. At least that was Matt and Christine's plan. Date nights were sacred for the couple. Three kids made it a necessity.

Christine dug into her purse. "It's got to be hard. That mission's the last stop on the line for a lot of people. They feed a ton of people."

"How do you know?"

"I looked them up on the Internet awhile ago."

"Figures." Matt squeezed her leg. Christine was always looking up stuff on the Internet. Talk about a font of information! He kept telling her such curiosity would land her in trouble someday, but he loved that about her. "I'll bet most of them don't even appreciate it."

Christine faced him, brow knit. "I don't think that's why the volunteers are there. Maybe they just want to help and get the heavenly reward."

"They're better people than I am."

She pointed at Clifton. "Well, look at the man. The rain's practically drowning him, and there he stands. I'll bet that bucket's filled more with water than it is money."

Clifton approached their SUV. "Good evening, fine folks!"

"Hey, Clifton!" Matt waved, then turned to Christine. "Can you get out some cash, babe?"

She leaned over toward her husband's window and waved too. "Hi, Clifton!"

“Hey there.” He hesitated, then smiled with a shake of his head. “What are your alls’ names again?”

“I’m Matt and this is my wife, Christine.”

“Sorry about that.”

“Oh, please. Don’t apologize. I’m horrible with names.” Christine dug through her purse. “I’m sure you’ve got enough on your mind. Oh, shoot, the light’s about to turn.” She ravaged some buried compartment. Matt called her purse Mary Poppins’s bag. “Here!” She shoved a bank envelope into Matt’s hand.

Matt dropped the bills into the bucket. A couple of twenties and some ones fluttered down to rest upon the meager offerings. A lot of water in there too, just as Christine had predicted. Clifton peered into the vehicle with a grin. “Well, you just made my night a lot shorter.”

“Good,” Matt said.

“God bless!” Christine said.

Clifton shouted as he walked away, “Oh, God does! God really does!”

They pulled away, flowing with the traffic around them, engulfed in a stream of cars very much like their own.



Matt pulled into a parking space at Burger King and turned to Christine as he slid the gearshift into park. “Well, there went our date money. How much do you have left?”

Christine slid out her wallet and slipped a thumb in the billfold. “Five bucks. How about you?”

Matt lifted himself off the seat and removed his billfold from his back pocket. “Six and some change.”

“How about we split a Whopper meal and then go to Starbucks?”

Matt shook his head with a laugh. “Feels like college days again. I don’t know if the old digestive system can take a meal like that. But I’m willing to give it a shot.”

“Yeah, but I can bet you if we walked into Clifton’s mission with bagfuls of Whoppers and trays of cappuccinos, the people wouldn’t know what happened.”

“I’m sure they get good meals there.”

Christine shrugged. “How should I know?”

“Yeah, me either. We should drive down there sometime.”

“Like we have time.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out, can’t we?” He could read Christine’s thoughts by the look she shot him. *With the hours you work? With all the lessons and activities? With church?*

“Yeah, the plate’s pretty full,” he said.

Matt wondered if they were eating gourmet off that plate. Or was it junk food, like the Whopper about to be consumed? And no matter how much béarnaise sauce they spooned on it, it would always be a Whopper. “Did your church talk much about places like Helping Hands when you were growing up?”

“Not hardly. Hey, you know what? It’s probably good it worked out this way. We’re hosting the men’s prayer breakfast tomorrow morning. I’ve got to make up the casseroles tonight anyway and I don’t want to get home too late.”

“So you’ve got the lacrosse run for Toby?”

“Shoot.” Christine looked up at the ceiling of the car and blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Yeah, I guess I’ll have to. Will you be done with the breakfast by eleven so I can take Mom to lunch?”

“I hope so. It starts at seven.”

“Yeah, but when Joe gets going . . .”

They slid out of the car, raising umbrellas as they shut their doors.

“Do you think Clifton worries about all this stuff?” Matt asked.

Christine waited as Matt pushed the power-lock button on his key ring. “Nope. I have a feeling his life is a whole lot less complicated but a whole lot more powerful.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Matt stared at the car parked next to theirs, a flummoxed old black Cadillac wearing a rusty overcoat and bald rubber shoes. Christine was probably right. Less complicated. More powerful. Like that could ever happen to them, since they were seemingly destined to live lives of busy insignificance. Not counting the kids, of course.

He took his wife's hand as they walked toward the building that looked pretty much like every other Burger King on the planet.

"Why does Clifton care so much and we don't, babe?" He yanked open the glass door and she walked inside.

"Because it's important to him."

"Ouch."

"Just being honest."

"Well, you are that, Chris."

Boy, was she. With the way he grew up, living hand to mouth, honestly resenting his parents for choosing obedience over riches, he didn't know how he'd forgotten what it felt like to live in such want. Four years Clifton had stood on that corner. Four years.

"At least we don't just drive on by," he muttered.

Christine shot him a look and greeted the attendant at the counter.

WHY READ A BOOK ABOUT JUSTICE?

When Lisa and I began talking about this idea, one advisor said a book about living justly in the world sounded like a book about eating your vegetables. We all know consuming raw carrots and spinach is important, but who wants to be reminded? Yuck.

Let's stop and get wings instead.

As each of us moves into adulthood, we make choices that shape our lives. We pick colleges, spouses, careers, churches, and homes; we make big decisions. We also make a series of small choices with less significant short-term consequences, like what to eat for lunch, whether to go exercise, and yes, whether or not to eat our vegetables. So with Mom not around to remind us, maybe the broccoli never gets eaten, or maybe we don't even buy it in the first place. Hey, it's a free country.

But we know we need to eat vegetables, right? Those of us who have crossed the magic 4-0 mark are acutely aware of how our diet affects our lives, if not by looking at the scale, then by feeling the heartburn! We wish fast food would live up to its name at three o'clock in the morning. Sometimes even that's not enough to make the change. Maybe we groan a bit in the morning, our backs hurt, our waists expand; but by lunchtime that burger or slice of pizza seems a far more interesting option than a salad.

In the same way, most of us sense some element is missing in our lives. Sometimes we are acutely aware of this. We groan with the world and wonder why everything aches

so profoundly, why we feel so far from who we know we could be, from the Garden of Eden, from God. We suspect the missing element may involve how we live in the world and the impact of our behavior. We suspect the question of whether there is justice in the world relates to choices we have made, are making, and will make. But perhaps we have forgotten, or perhaps we never knew, what a life lived justly might look like. The question rarely comes up in regular conversation, any more than discussions about the consumption of broccoli abound at our kids' soccer games.

So we stumble through life with unanswered and sometimes unvoiced questions, some X factor missing from our lives, but we fail to remember or just don't know what that factor is. Or we realize exactly what's missing but have no idea how to incorporate issues of justice into our lives, particularly in a way that would safeguard us against completely disrupting our everyday existence.

We do not like disruptions.

Has anybody pulled out in traffic right in front of you recently? Did the worker at the drive-through forget to include the ketchup? Is your favorite shortcut barricaded by a roadwork sign, forcing you to detour? Then you know what we mean.

We live in a disruption-avoidance culture. Whole industries exist to make life less discombobulated. Grocery shopping too much of a hassle? Order online and we'll have your order ready for pickup. Too busy to get your car washed? We'll come to the office, and if you give us your credit card number over the phone, you won't even know we were there. What's next? Drive-through MRIs?

Why are we so afraid of disruptions? What are we doing that is so completely important we cannot be interrupted?

How we answer these questions affects how we interact with those in need and whether or not we actually live a life of justice. Do we even see the issues at hand? Or, as we may suspect, is the disruption-avoidance team winning

and keeping us from asking meaningful questions—how we spend our money, how we use our time, how we raise our children, how we interact with God—that influence whether we live justly on this planet and in our communities?

What Is This Word You Keep Using?

It wouldn't be a stretch to say our family has watched *The Princess Bride* over fifty times. Throughout the film, the bad guy, Vizzini, repeatedly uses the word *inconceivable* in situations clearly, well, conceivable. After one such use, his sidekick Inigo Montoya challenges him with our favorite quote from the movie: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

What do you think of when you hear the word *justice*? Perhaps you think of a criminal getting what he or she deserves. It is possible this word conjures aging hippies, the ACLU, peace signs, sit-ins, and miles of tie-dye. This word, so infused with cultural and political implications for American Christians—both positive and negative depending on your background—automatically raises hackles. But we desire the church to come to a more holistic and biblical understanding of the word, an understanding more connected to the heartbeat of God.

We use the word *justice* often on the pages of this book. What does it mean? Or better yet, what do we mean when we use it?

We define *justice* simply as acting right in our relationships, as determining how we stand in relation to others in our world. We desire, based on many deeper beliefs about the world and our role in it, to be always moving toward some point where our actions and our hopes for the world mirror one another. While we recognize that may never happen in our lifetime, this is our strongest belief about the future.

Yet we realize the conversation about justice can be difficult when we utilize words infused with so much and such varied meaning. For example, let's consider the word *hope*. Lisa and I might agree on the dictionary definition of the word as "to look forward to with confidence or expectation." Yet if you were to ask us *what* we hoped for, we would talk about different outcomes, quickly revealing that while we might define *hope* with the same basic meaning, our use of it varies. This is from two people who (1) have been married for nineteen years and are raising a family together; (2) worship together; and (3) come from the same basic faith tradition (i.e., conservative and Protestant). Ultimately, while we share the same basic framework for seeing the world, our usages of the word *hope* sometimes part company.

Perhaps some synonyms for the word *justice* might help. While this may not bring us to a precise definition, these similar words and phrases might shed some light on how we define this word. When we think of justice, we think of concepts such as *mercy*, *compassion*, *being fair*, and *living by the Golden Rule*. We think of people like Mother Teresa, William Wilberforce, and Martin Luther King Jr.

But Is It Still Possible to Live That Way?

Most of us, particularly if we come from a faith tradition, sense these concepts—mercy, compassion, being fair, and living by the Golden Rule—are important for every human to embody. Many of us, however, accepted a myth of contemporary culture that relegates virtues such as these to forgotten values of a bygone era when neighbors still borrowed a cup of sugar, Sunday dinner was eaten around a large table with family and friends, and nobody would dream of missing church.

Americans tend to live with a Norman Rockwell view of the past. Rockwell was an illustrator who captured views

of American life mostly through his work for *The Saturday Evening Post*. His *Freedom of Worship* depicted a group of people of differing races and ethnicities praying together. This famous illustration was done during World War II and conveyed a notion of religious values critical to Americans. At the time, people in this country were looking for something traditional to hold on to as a global war turned their world upside down, and works like Rockwell's offered that. His works are still treasured by many Americans as a picture of what could be if we all had a little more character, a little more discipline, a little more gratitude.

Many Americans today view the past as shaped by images like Rockwell's, images that allow us to hold on to a myth that there was an idyllic time in our world when everyone prayed, cared for their neighbor, and went to church on Sunday. In the name of morality, many today cling to and perpetuate the belief that if we could return to the past, everything would be good and the world would be just.

We do not agree.

In fact, this way of thinking may be harming our efforts to act more justly in the world today. We wonder if an overly simplistic reading of history stops us from living today in light of what we hope the future to be. Perhaps an overly romantic view of the past of America and other Western nations keeps us from seeing the struggles that humanity has always faced in seeking to live justly.

It seems to us that in order to accept the notion that mercy, compassion, and fairness are the bygone values of a former day, one needs an unrealistically optimistic view of the past. Combine this with a pessimistic view of the future that is also distorted, and you have a formula for sitting on your hands and worrying, telling yourself that things will never be the way they were "back then." Even Christ's words, "You always have the poor with you" (Matt. 26:11), are misconstrued as an invitation to do nothing because, some may claim, there have always been poor people, so

what hope could we possibly have of doing anything about poverty?

We doubt that's what Jesus meant. Those words about the constant presence of the poor were delivered in between sections of Matthew's Gospel that describe the betrayal of Christ and the march to the cross. Rather than being seen as a statement that there is no hope, those words may be better understood as helping set the context for the work of Christ on the cross, which forms the basis for what Peter called "the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

But Hasn't the World Always Been Unjust?

We have yet to realize the hope Peter talks about. The poor really are, in fact, with us. Even the work of Norman Rockwell highlighted the inequities of our recent past. Consider his poignant painting *The Problem We All Live With*, which dealt with the physical danger African American children faced in simply trying to go to school at the beginning of desegregation.

Perhaps this is why the model of Christ is so important. Humankind seems to have some general sense of the need for mercy, compassion, being fair, and living by the Golden Rule. We see hopeful glimpses of this from time to time, such as the scores of people reaching out to help victims of the 2004 tsunami or Hurricane Katrina. But apart from some future hope, these brief looks are merely distractions from the awful state we find ourselves in and the horrible future we seem destined for. Without the lens of a future hope, we would all see the world as existing on a steady stream downward.

In many ways, the struggle for justice can be seen as one of the defining issues of humanity, one important framework for understanding all of history. The public record of this planet tells a tale of people living in relation to their fellow citizens, sometimes well and sometimes poorly. It

tells how nations lived in relation to other nations. More recently, perhaps in the last five hundred to eight hundred years, history tells us how well or how poorly corporations have lived in relation to their workers, their culture, and the world. This is not a new struggle.

But rather than discourage you, let this increase your interest in these concerns. The fact that humanity has always struggled with them should provide you courage and confidence in knowing you are part of an epic journey, one that has been the subject of struggles throughout the ages.

In the next chapter and beyond, we will address how our faith impacts living justly. For those of us from the Christian tradition, we have reason for delight and trepidation. We delight in the sense that the Bible and church history are certainly full of struggles for justice, and we can rely on storylines from both to inform us how to act. We have trepidation because, ironically, the Bible and church history are also full of stories of individuals and cultures who acted horribly in regard to living justly in the world, and we know the depths to which we can fall.

But before we turn to faith traditions, can we agree that the world has struggled with issues of justice as long as there has been recorded history? We are not breaking new territory here. So many other cultures, including those with deep conceptions of God and those with none, have sought to address these issues.

You are not alone. By engaging with this concern, you place yourself in the broad stream of the world's struggles. Welcome.

MEDITATION BY BRIAN MCLAREN

The English language is beautiful, but we have a peculiar problem in English. In Spanish, French, Italian, and most other

human languages, the New Testament word *dikaïos* is always translated “justice,” a sturdy and social word that evokes fairness, integrity, right treatment, and equity in human relationships. But in English, translators often choose to translate *dikaïos* as the word “righteousness.” This is unfortunate, even tragic, because many people hear the word “righteousness” and think only of personal and private “piety” or “religiosity” or “personal morality.” As important as these things are, they are not *dikaïos*.

So may I suggest that when you read your English Bible, you try to rediscover the word “justice” and let it enrich your understanding of God and the Christian life? Perhaps if you do, this creed will become an important affirmation of your faith.

A Justice Creed

*We believe that God is just and that God loves
justice.*

God delights in just laws and rejoices in just people.
God liberates those who are oppressed by injustice
And is grieved by unjust people and the unjust systems
they create and sustain.

God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,
And God’s kingdom belongs to those willing to be
persecuted for the sake of justice.

To God, justice is a weighty thing that can never be
ignored.

We believe that Jesus came to display the justice of
God,

In word and deed, in life, death, and resurrection.
The justice God desires, which he taught, must sur-
pass that of the hypocrites,

For the justice of God is a compassionate justice,
Rich in mercy and abounding in love for the last, the
least, the lost, and the excluded.

On his cross, Jesus drew the injustice of humanity
into the light,

And there the heartless injustice of human empire
met
The reconciling justice of the kingdom of God.
The resurrection of Jesus proclaims that the true
justice of God,
Naked, vulnerable, and scarred by abuse, is
stronger
Than the violent injustice of humanity, armed with
weapons, conceit, deceit, and lies.
We believe that the Holy Spirit is here now,
Convicting the world of sin and injustice,
Warning that God's judgment will come on all that is
unjust.
We believe that the kingdom of God is not a matter
of superficial things
But is justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Empowered by the Spirit, then, we seek God's king-
dom and we seek God's justice,
For the world as it is has not yet become the world
as God desires it to be.
And so we live and work and pray,
Until justice rolls down like water,
Until justice flows like a never-ending stream.
For we believe that God is just, and the true and liv-
ing God loves justice.
Amen.