

Higher Ground

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Justice is the ethical value that tends to emerge at the top of most lists. For the ancients (biblical and classical), justice had a large, powerful sense, almost equivalent to “what is right.” “Righteousness” is interchangeable with “justice” in the biblical translations of the Greek word *dikaiosyne*. Justice reigns when there is order and rightness and everyone is doing what they should in the place for which God and nature have fitted and gifted them.

Our narrower modern and contemporary understanding of justice may be best defined as “fairness”—giving everyone what is “due” them. Fairness means getting what you deserve (and giving what you ought) as a human being, as a worker, as a citizen, etc.. What you get is proportional to what you give. Sometimes the market is unfair; sometimes the law is unfair. A commitment to justice is what launches the appropriate compensation and reform for unfairness and injustice.

St. Paul’s comments to masters and slaves in Colossians (3:22-4:1) are a clear call to move from the “lower ground” of “partiality” and “injustice” to the moral ground of justice and fairness. Making this move up to just, righteous, moral ground is step one.

So it is striking that in a brief companion letter to *Colossians*, St. Paul urges Philemon, a master, to receive back his thieving, runaway slave Onesimus on still higher ground—in a new relationship, as a brother rather than slave (Phil. 10-17). This was more than Onesimus deserved, more than justice required. Jesus’ forgiveness (instead of punishment) of the adulterous woman (John 8) is another example of higher ground. And the best example is when we look in the mirror: God (and many people in our lives from our parents onward) have not imposed simple justice, fairness, and reciprocity on us but have moved to the higher ground of forgiveness, generosity, and redemption.

Moving upward to fairness and justice in our personal, corporate, and political lives is the essential first step in becoming ethical. But once justice is established, we must not be content with an “eye-for-an-eye” approach to the moral life. Let’s always look for ways of lifting our responses and relationships to higher ground.