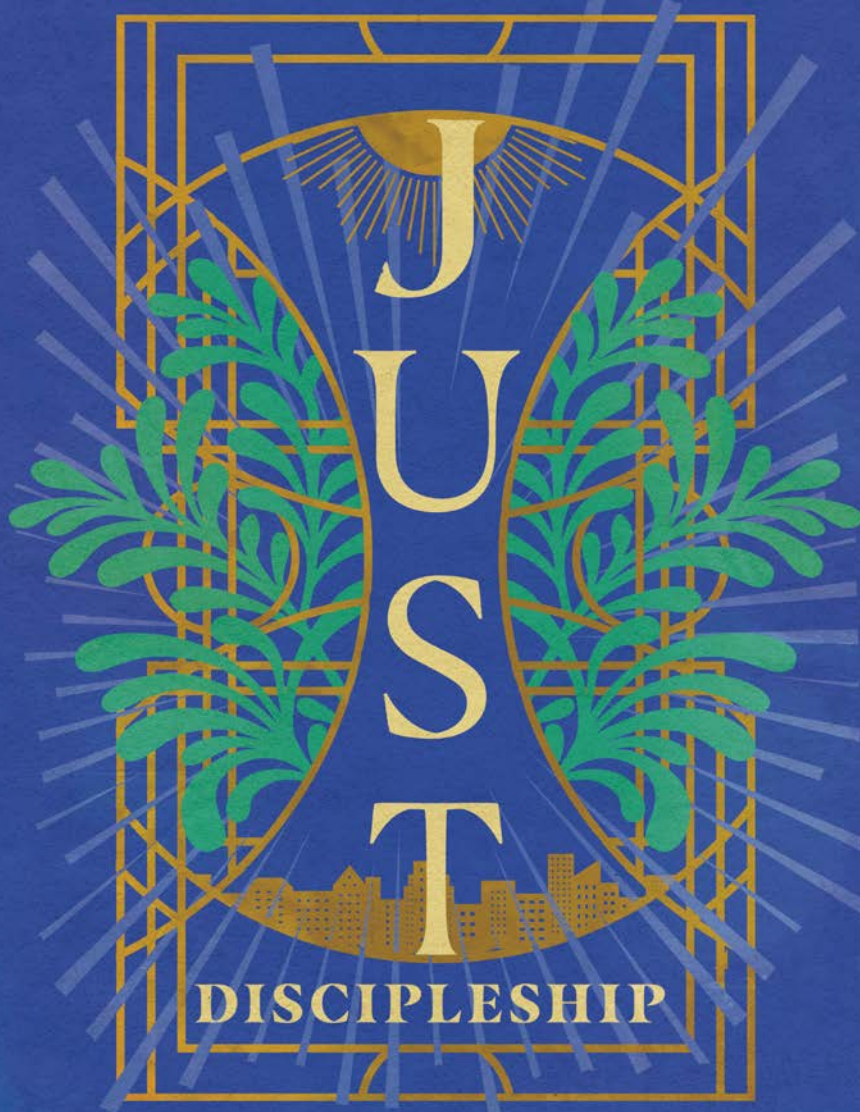


MICHAEL J. RHODES



BIBLICAL JUSTICE IN AN UNJUST WORLD



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THE STORY BEHIND (AND THE STORY OF) THIS BOOK

JUST DISCIPLESHIP EXPLORES what Scripture says about how disciples of Jesus become just. Before diving in, it may help to know a bit of the story behind this book. I was raised by a family that loved Jesus, and in a church that taught me to follow Jesus with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. They also taught me that the Bible was an authoritative, fully reliable guide to understanding what following Jesus meant in every area of life. These convictions remain central to what it means for me to live as a disciple of Jesus.

I was also raised in Memphis, a majority Black southern city with a legacy of racism and poverty. To take but one example, Dr. King was assassinated here while supporting the Memphis Sanitation Workers strike. Like many American Christians, our family and church shared in that long, problematic legacy in various ways, some of which I explore in the chapters that follow. One result of that legacy during my growing up years in the '80s and '90s was that while nearly 65 percent of Memphians are Black and nearly 25 percent fall below the poverty line, my church, neighborhood, Christian school, and overall upbringing was almost exclusively white and upper-middle class.¹

I remember very little explicitly racist talk in my growing up years. I was raised in a segregated community, but we would never have identified ourselves as segregationists. Living a life of white, middle-class affluence in a city filled with Black poverty just seemed natural. Nor did the dynamics of being white, middle class, and affluent seem to have much to do with discipleship.

¹Although all such decisions are debated, I have chosen to capitalize *Black* but not *white* in referring to racial designations. See Nancy Coleman, “Why We’re Capitalizing Black,” *New York Times* (July 5, 2020), www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html.

And then, at some point, our church invited Dr. John Perkins to speak. The moment he opened his mouth, you knew Perkins loved Jesus and loved his Word. He was just like us!

But he pointed out all this stuff in Scripture I'd never paid attention to, stuff that had never crossed my discipleship radar. Stuff like God's overwhelming love for the poor, his care for the ethnic outsider, his passionate commitment to justice. Perkins showed us that to be serious about Scripture, to be serious about *discipleship*, we had to be serious about poverty, racism, and injustice. Not because of some liberal agenda or to "keep up with the times." Because "the Bible tells us so"!

This changed my life. Our youth group visited Baltimore and met with white Presbyterians like me who had taken Perkins's challenge seriously. They'd moved into an economically depressed community, and seen the Spirit move powerfully.² I went to Covenant College and studied community development, and my wife, Rebecca, and I spent our first two years together working on agricultural development projects in Kenya. In 2011, we came home to the United States, and moved into South Memphis, the economically poorest urban neighborhood in our state. We joined a church plant in the community; Rebecca went to work as a schoolteacher, and I worked for Advance Memphis, a nonprofit in our neighborhood. All along the way, we saw ourselves as simply responding to Jesus' invitation in Scripture; the Bible told us so!

The Lord has been so kind to us on this journey, bringing joy into our lives that we could not have imagined. But along the way, we've been struck again and again with our failures. I have been shocked by how hard we find it to love our neighbors as ourselves. God has called us "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly" with our God (Mic 6:8). Why is it that even when we agree this is central to our mission, we struggle so much to live it out?

I believe part of the answer comes down to this: *knowing that* Jesus wants us to do justice isn't enough. Disciples don't just know what Jesus wants us to do. Disciples are on a journey of *becoming* people who *follow* Jesus in *doing* what he wants us to do. Discipleship, in other words, is all about *formation*. And if the discipleship of my childhood often forgot that God cares about justice, the discipleship of my adulthood has often been shallow in knowing how to *become* people who embody God's justice.

²See Mark Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

This book asks the question, What does Scripture say about how the people of God become just disciples, and what does that mean for just discipleship today? In trying to answer this two-part question, I do three things.

1. **Carefully read biblical texts related to justice.** Most chapters of *Just Discipleship* focus on close readings of specific biblical texts. Discipleship is about following Jesus, and Scripture offers us authoritative guidance on how to do that.
2. **Bring biblical texts into dialogue with what theologians say about ethical discipleship.** Theologians have spent thousands of years investigating moral formation, or what I will often call “moral discipleship.”³ Theological accounts of character, virtue, ritual, and liturgy offer us resources for understanding how God intends for us to become who he created us to be, and I draw on these resources in my exploration of justice in Scripture.
3. **Imagine what moral discipleship might look like today.** The biblical texts I explore do not give us a blueprint for doing justice today. But, as Chris Wright suggests, they do offer us *paradigms*—models that, in all their messiness and materiality, inspire us to imagine what it might look like to live out just discipleship in the messy material realities of our world. Because of this, chapters 4 through 12 of this book each:
 - a. begin with a contemporary justice issue,
 - b. wrestle with specific biblical texts related to just discipleship, and
 - c. consider how these specific texts inspire us to live as just disciples in relation to that contemporary justice issue.

How did I pick the contemporary justice questions I explore? I have drawn from my own context and experience, beginning with some of the issues that I’ve wrestled with as an upper-middle class white male seeking to follow Jesus in an almost exclusively Black, economically poor neighborhood. Because of this, let me state as clearly as possible: *issues of poverty and race are not the only justice issues facing Christians in our world*—not by a long shot. Modern day slavery and sex trafficking, the plight of the unborn, religious persecution, the marginalization of people with disabilities, the refugee crisis, global hunger, climate change, the suffering of women, war, and more demand the

³For my in-depth treatment of moral formation through practice, see Michael J. Rhodes, *Formative Feasting: Practices and Virtue Ethics in the Deuteronomic Tithing Meal and Corinthian Lord’s Supper*, Studies in Biblical Literature 176 (New York: Peter Lang, 2022).

attention of God’s people and could be explored in a book like this. My focus on racial injustice by white Americans against Black Americans is not intended to downplay the importance of the suffering of other groups, nor to explain that suffering by buying into a problematic Black/white binary.⁴ This book focuses on the issues it does because it emerges from my personal experience reading Scripture within my context, for the sake of following Jesus on the road toward just discipleship in that context.

Your context may be different from mine, but the Bible’s invitation to just discipleship is universal. I hope that my exploration of what it might look like to receive that invitation in one time and place will help you imagine how you could receive that same invitation in yours. Indeed, our family currently finds itself in precisely this kind of recontextualizing. While this book emerged out of our time in Memphis, during the final stages of editing, our family moved to Aotearoa/New Zealand. Our new context requires us to reimagine what the timeless biblical call to just discipleship looks like in *this* time and place.

Even if you occasionally disagree with what I argue just discipleship looks like in *my* context, I hope you’ll allow the biblical interpretation to inspire you to think about what just discipleship might require in *your* context. Because, at the end of the day, Scripture declares that seeking justice is the path to *joy*. Or, as the psalmist would say, “*Happy* are those who observe justice” (Ps 106:3, emphasis added).

THE ROAD AHEAD: THE STORY OF THIS BOOK

Speaking of disagreement, some may already wonder whether I am overemphasizing the role justice plays in the Bible and discipleship, or perhaps slipping in a definition of justice contrary to the Bible’s own. These are legitimate concerns! To address them, in chapter two, I summarize the justice story in Scripture as it unfolds from Genesis to Revelation. I also explore several ways biblical scholars and philosophers have defined justice before making a case for John Goldingay’s definition of “justice and righteousness” as “the faithful exercise of power in community” as our most reliable shorthand summary of what the Bible’s justice language means.⁵

In chapter three, I offer a theological model designed to help us understand the process of moral discipleship. I particularly draw on theologians exploring

⁴See Jonathan Tran, *Asian Americans and the Spirit of Racial Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

⁵John Goldingay, *The Theology of the Book of Isaiah* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 21.

questions of virtue and character. This chapter concludes part one, “Just Discipleship: Mapping the Terrain.”

In part two, “Becoming Just Disciples,” I explore the way the feasts of Deuteronomy (chapter four), the justice songs of the Psalms (chapter five), the wisdom teaching of Proverbs (chapter six), and the imitation of Jesus in 1 John (chapter seven) all intend to help God’s people *become* just. Along the way, we’ll consider how these texts might shape us to do justice in relation to economic segregation in American neighborhoods, the way we sing and pray in church, the plight of low-wage workers, and the persistence of racism and classism in American life. And for readers already wondering where the *grace* is in all this justice talk, in chapter seven I explore how these practices of just discipleship are both received as God’s gracious gifts and embraced as God-ordained tasks.

In part three, “Becoming a Just People,” I consider how Scripture shapes the whole people of God for the work of justice. The texts I draw on address the people of God as a political community in the sense that the *church itself* is an outpost of God’s kingdom. Moreover, these texts call that outpost community to organize its life in ways that align with the divine king’s just rule.

In chapter eight, I do a deep dive on the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25. While many may be familiar with this text, I suggest there’s far more going on here than we realize. In chapter nine, I explore how later biblical authors drew on the Jubilee even when their situations and circumstances were quite different from those envisioned in Leviticus. I suggest we follow in their footsteps, not least in seeking a robustly Christian response to a particularly controversial justice question: the case for reparations for Black Americans.

I conclude part three with an example from the New Testament, drawing on Paul’s words to the Corinthian church regarding the Lord’s Supper (chapter ten). I explore the relevance of Paul’s teaching for the way contemporary churches organize their common life, and draw special attention to possible implications for multiethnic churches in the United States.

In part four, “Discipling Politics: Just Discipleship amid the Nations,” I consider how just disciples should relate to the political communities within which we find ourselves. I take a close look at two of the few characters in the Bible who find themselves wielding significant political power within Gentile political communities: Joseph (chapter eleven) and Daniel (chapter twelve). Their stories illuminate some of the pitfalls of contemporary Christian approaches to politics in the United States, as well as offer an invitation to just discipleship in our political lives.

In the final chapter, I summarize the key arguments of the book and offer some final reflections on what it might look like for the church to begin embracing God's program for just discipleship today.

Hopefully you now have a sense of where this book comes from and where it's going. For some, the journey may sound familiar and exciting. For others, it may seem strange and threatening. Regardless, I hope you'll keep reading, bring your questions along, and join me in exploring just discipleship in God's Word and in God's world.

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