**JUSTICE**

Before we talk about restitution as an element of justice, let’s explore what we mean by justice. It’s a broad term that gets used in a lot of ways, from the legal to the theological.

*Discussion:*

* How do you understand justice? -
* Have participants give their definition of it and what informs it (their faith, their politics, their upbringing, etc.)

We often think of justice in a legal sense, of getting what you deserve. But God tends to talk of justice as shalom: the Hebrew word that means wholeness and peace, in which we are all in right relationship with God, each other, and our environment.

Christian Scripture talks extensively about justice as a core calling of God’s people. Indeed, many translators have noted that the distinction we make between justice and righteousness is a false one. The Hebrew word for both is the same, because in the Jewish world in which Jesus lived and preached, a person could not be considered righteous if he was not also just.

**A few examples of what the Bible has to say about justice:**

Psalm 140:12 “I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.”

Micah 6:8 “What does the Lord require of you? To do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.”

Deuteronomy 10:18 “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving him food and clothing.”

God shows his concern for justice in the rules he lays out for the new nation of Israel. We see this in both Deuteronomy 15:1-15 and Leviticus 25:1-17. (Have the group read both passages.)

*Discussion:*

* What does the cancelling of debts, return of land and freeing of slaves say to you about God’s idea of justice?
* Do you see elements in this that you would identify as restitution/redistribution/restoration?

Another vision of justice is presented in Isaiah 2:4 “They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not take up sword against nation, nor shall they train for war anymore.” When this happens, God says, we will “walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:5).

Notice that God doesn’t simply tell them to store their swords and spears in the shed in case they should need them again. He doesn’t tell them to store them up in an armoury so they can always be assured of protection. He calls for a radical vulnerability: transform your weapons into instruments of growth and renewal. Where once you had a sword, now make a plough. Where once you caused death, now give life.

*Discussion:*

* What “weapons” (wealth, privilege, access to resources including education and healthcare) do some people have?
* Do they transform them or do they tend to save them up?
* What might it look like if those weapons were converted?
* Has this study changed how you would define justice?

**FORGIVENESS**

Forgiveness is one of the most challenging things we are asked to do as Christians.

*Discussion:*

* How do you define forgiveness?
* Does it have to mean forgetfulness as well?
* Is there a danger in this?

Read Matthew 18:21-22. When Peter asks if forgiving someone seven times is enough, Jesus responds by saying no, it’s seventy times seven —in other words, as many times as the offender needs. In this way, forgiveness is a lifestyle: one in which we are called upon constantly to let go of corrosive bitterness.

*Discussion:*

Sometimes it’s easier to forgive some than others. We can perhaps forgive people who genuinely seem to be trying to do right, or who didn’t intend to hurt us. Some of us may have friends or relatives with addictions, and we know that they are not entirely in control of their actions. But what do we do when forgiveness seems like giving a free pass to someone to continue hurting us without changing his ways?

It’s notable that the passage right before Jesus’ discussion with Matthew is about accountability.

Read Matthew 18: 15-17. In this passage, Jesus calls for confrontation of those who have hurt us: confrontation as an individual, and if necessary, corporate confrontation. When there is no repentance or changing of behaviour, the offender can even be exiled from the community.

Forgiveness does not mean that we cannot insist on accountability for those who have committed wrongs, or that we cannot continue to advocate for justice, both for ourselves and for others. Perhaps a helpful passage to keep in mind here is Luke 18:1-8. (Read this passage together).

*Discussion:*

* What traits do we see in the widow?
* What does Jesus say about her persistence and advocacy?

In this passage, the judge relents not because he is moved by the widow’s plight but because he is worn down by her persistence. We have permission to continue to insist on justice and to wear down the power structures that resist it.

*Discussion:*

* What is the relationship between forgiveness and accountability?
* What is the appropriate response to forgiveness?
* How might restitution be a part of that?

Forgiveness is a term that has sometimes been cheapened by how casually it has been used to cover up sins and act as though they never happened or require no redress. People are sometimes understandably suspicious, then, when they are entreated to forgive, afraid it may mean being asked to embrace a sort of historical amnesia.

In truth, forgiveness does not minimise the transgression: rather, it is the only response that recognizes the immutability and irreversibility of the act. An eye for an eye would suggest that once punishment is dealt, justice has been done, which in turn presumes that a price can be put on human suffering and it can be made right.

Forgiveness, strangely enough, seems to recognise that transgressions can never fully be made right and appropriate, because the evil act simply cannot be reversed. Far from minimising what has happened, it is a model that takes it very seriously indeed. Forgiveness doesn’t mean we must go on as if nothing has happened; it understands with utmost gravity that something has happened that cannot be undone, and therefore can only be forgiven.

**RECONCILIATION**

Reconciliation has become a word and idea that much of the world associates with South Africa. But the ideal of the Rainbow Nation sometimes papers over some of the great rifts that still exist and keeps us from truly grappling with what it means to be reconciled to each other and how we go about this monumental task.

*Discussion:*

* What is reconciliation?
* Does it just mean we can co-exist in the same country?
* Does it mean being civil and making sure each other’s rights are protected in the political sphere?
* Must we be in relationship for true reconciliation?

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-19

*Discussion:*

* What do you think he means by saying we have a ministry of reconciliation?
* How is that part of our identity as Christians?
* How can we be ambassadors of reconciliation?

Like forgiveness, reconciliation is something that can be used cynically and become too cheap. If we keep in mind that Christ’s death reconciles us to God, then we must remember, as German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, that “what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us.” Reconciliation is a call into whole, healed relationship with each other.

Read Luke 10:25-37

The parable of the Good Samaritan shows us that the Samaritan recognizes the man’s wounds, binds them up, and goes out of his way to care for him, at cost to himself. Reconciliation is not his goal, but a result of his action-oriented justice.

*Discussion:*

* Discuss the parable.
* The first two people who pass by don’t want to be slowed down by the man’s injuries and the possible risk to themselves (the thieves might still have been in the area).
* Do we self-protect?
* In what ways might this keep us from reaching out to others?

Sometimes wounds are not visible. How can we find out if people are wounded? What is our responsibility when they are? How do we learn to live sacrificially?

How might restitution be an action through which we move toward reconciliation?

**RESTITUTION**

*Discussion:*

* What concepts come to mind when you think of restitution?
* If you were asked to define it in a sentence, what would you say it is?

Perhaps the first place to start is in defining the terms we will be using. Restitution is a complex term. We typically hear it in a legal sense: a man who has stolen R1000 is ordered to make compensation in the same amount. We often understand it as a quid-pro-quo kind of arrangement: pay back precisely what was taken, and all parties can go their separate ways with the matter resolved.

We understand restitution to go much deeper than this, and to be one of the most significant tools available to us in addressing the residual ills of apartheid and discrimination as well as other causes of inequity in our communities. Restitution involves seeking to set right the generational ills of inequality by engaging those who have benefitted from the system, directly or indirectly, in transferring wealth and social capital and reinvesting in communities that still suffer from the grim legacy of the past.

In such a model, a one-to-one sort of repayment makes no sense. Imagine this scenario: a man’s bicycle is stolen. This now means he has no transport, and cannot get to work; thus he loses his job. Without a job, he cannot educate his children or support his family. Perhaps he used that bicycle to run errands for the homebound elderly woman next door; now she is affected by the loss as well. Jobless and frustrated, he becomes a drain on his community rather than a resource. He is not the only person who has been affected by the crime; his family, his neighbours and his community have also suffered.

*Discussion:*

* What would restitution look like in this situation?
* Is it returning the bicycle?
* Is it more than that?

Now suppose a couple of generations have passed. The bicycle is now considered an antique and is worth a great deal. It now belongs to the grandchildren of the man who originally stole it. They don’t know the bicycle was stolen and were not, themselves, participatory in the original crime. Perhaps they intend to sell it to pay for school fees. What might restitution look like in this situation, in which the original wrongdoer is gone but his offspring benefit from a crime they did not commit?

Now imagine that theft not only of resources such as land, education and money has occurred on a broad scale, but also of intangibles: dignity, a sense of safety, self-worth, an understanding of one’s rights, a sense of belonging in one’s own country.

*Discussion:*

* What do you feel you’ve lost or has been taken from you that might be deserving of restitution?
* What would need to happen to set it right?
* In what way do you feel you’ve benefitted from the past or from existing social structures that favoured you in some way?
* Do you feel a need to engage in some restitution?
* What forms could that take?

Read Luke 19:1-10.

*Discussion:*

* How does the story of Zacchaeus inform the way we might think about restitution?
* Notice that it is not until Zacchaeus commits to a concrete act of restitution that Jesus says “Today salvation has come to this house.”

In the first lesson, we looked at the idea of justice, including the Biblical commands around the Jubilee and care for the poor.

*Discussion:*

* How do you think restitution is connected to justice?
* How might it be connected to forgiveness (perhaps as an appropriate response to forgiveness) and reconciliation?