

My husband and I sat down, coffee in hand, for a conversation about biblical justice vs. criminal justice.

First, I should provide a bit of context. My husband is a part-time sheriff's deputy. He retired two years ago after a full-time career spanning over 40 years in law enforcement. He started in juvenile law (for you Gen Xers, think *21 Jump Street*-that's right, ladies, I married Tom Hanson). Eventually he retired as the Jail Commander for the Walton County Sheriff's Office. For me, a portion of my work with a local nonprofit involves working with inmates serving as community workers in [a garden on the campus of the jail](#). We both have logged many hours with people who are incarcerated.

As our conversation began, my husband leaned into his badge and I into my social justice banner. Typical of these conversations, we put on our own metaphorical shoes and head down our respective paths. We meander for a time, disagreeing and agreeing to disagree until our paths cross. That intersection happened at the word "justice." What does it mean? Where does it come from? Is it even possible for humans to achieve this on earth?

## Defining Biblical Justice vs Criminal Justice

In the United States, the term "justice" has become synonymous with the criminal justice system: the system we employ to label people as criminals. Lawyers, politicians, organizations, victims, and the accused all call for "justice" to satisfy their specific narratives. Justice anchored to this foundation is subject to the interpretation of the user. We toss around the word as if it were just a word; with each toss, its meaning devolves into the "fluff" that creates our divisions.

## Why Biblical Justice is Foundational to the Universe

My intent here is not to make a case for or against this system, but to invite you to contemplate the use of the word "justice" within it. Justice is not a concept on a sliding scale; it is foundational to the universe (Psalm 89:14). It springs from the character of God and is rooted in the message of Jesus: that [we are all equally created in the image of God](#). This truth compels us to act justly for the vulnerable, the marginalized, the neglected, and the hated alike. Humans dedicated to this truth represent the realization of God's Kingdom on earth.

## Biblical Justice: Recognizing the Image of God in Hiding

My first revelation of this came from another conversation, this time with my neighbor who is a Superior Court Judge. Officers had brought a local man to jail after he shot and killed his wife in front of his elementary-age children; he had unsuccessfully tried to take his own life. I did not know this man, but I had a strong opinion on what I perceived as the missed opportunity of his death by suicide.

However, my neighbor *did* know him and shared details that made it hard for me to see this man simply as the monster I wanted to believe he was. I felt ashamed of my failure to recognize the image of God hiding in plain sight. This man, too, is made in God's image.



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