

# GRIST

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from } **“The Bible & Catholic Social Teaching”**  
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[www.loyola.edu/justice/spirituality.html](http://www.loyola.edu/justice/spirituality.html)

The Bible is both historical document and canonical, sacred text for a believing community. It is proclaimed in liturgy and is “the soul of sacred theology.” Though virtually no one feels that the Bible offers concrete solutions to today’s complex social problems, **the Bible is the foundation of a Judeo-Christian vision of life. It discloses the kind of God we love and worship. This God is interested in the world, in human history, and in the manner in which humans live in community.** This theme is pervasive throughout both Testaments. In one sense, the “faith that does justice” is simply an application of the great commandment to love God with one’s whole heart, mind and soul, and the neighbor as one’s self. **What the Bible relentlessly affirms...is that the love of neighbor is manifest especially in care for the weak and the powerless.**

[James Gustafson] commented that the Bible does not offer revealed morality but revealed reality and tells us *the kinds of people we are to become* if we are to hear its message faithfully.

Hebrew terms for justice are applied to a wide variety of things. Scales or weights are called just when they give a fair measure, and paths are called just when they do what a path or way should do – lead to a goal. Laws are just, not because they conform to an external norm or constitution, but because they create harmony within the community. Acting justly consists in avoiding violence and fraud and other actions that destroy communal life and in pursuing that which sustains the life of the community. Yahweh is just not only as lawgiver and Lord of the covenant; his saving deeds are called “just deeds” because they restore the community when it has been threatened. The justice of Yahweh is not in contrast to other covenant qualities, such as steadfast love, mercy, or faithfulness, but, in many texts, is virtually equated with them.

**In general terms the biblical idea of justice can be described as *fidelity to the demands of a relationship.***

“Biblical justice” is not as clearly distinguished from “charity”...as in contemporary social ethics. Actions such as confronting the oppressive power of the wealthy and alleviating the sufferings of the poor are ultimately ways of “doing right” and seeking right relationships between God and humanity, and among humans themselves. On the other hand, today, the traditional works of mercy (e.g., feeding the hungry, caring for the imprisoned, welcoming strangers) are equated with “social justice ministry.” While such actions are certainly a hallmark of church life, a biblical concern for justice has three elements that supplement such actions: (1) biblical justice is embedded in those very narratives that form a people’s self-identity; (2) actions that manifest concern for the weak and vulnerable become mandated in law and are not, as often thought today, supererogatory; and (3) biblical justice always has a “prophetic dimension,” by virtue of entering into conflict with oppressive structures of injustice.

The primeval history of Genesis 1 – 11 provides a rich resource for reflection on issues crucial to faith and justice. **Men and women are God’s representatives and conversation partners in the world, with a fundamental dignity that must be respected and fostered. They are to exist in interdependence and mutual support, and are to care for the world with respect, as for a gift received from God. Yet the human condition is flawed by a drive to overstep the limits of the human situation and to claim autonomous power. The result of this drive is violence.** The Genesis narrative functions as both a normative description of the human condition before God and a critical principle against any power that distorts or usurps the dignity of humanity or God’s claim over men and women.

While liberation from oppression is a fundamental aspect of the exodus narrative, it is not simply

*freedom from* that is important but *freedom for* the formation of a community that lives under the covenant.

Oppression and idolatry are never far apart.

The events of salvation history, especially the leading out from Egypt and the covenant at Sinai, are the foundations in Israel of a society that seeks justice and manifests concern for the marginal. This concern is incorporated in law and custom that take different shapes in different historical circumstances stretching over five centuries... They offer a vision of life in society before God that is to inform religious belief and social practice... Although these traditions do not offer concrete directives for our complex socioeconomic world, they offer a vision of a “contrast society,” not ruled by power and greed but where the treatment of the marginal becomes the touchstone of “right relationship” to God. **As Christians we today must ask soberly how our lives provide a contrast society, and whether, when we think of our “right relation” to God, the concerns of the marginal in our own time have been really made concrete in our attitudes and style of life.**

[re. the temptation to “spiritualize” poverty] The “poor” in the Bible are almost without exception *powerless* people who experience economic and social deprivation.

When a people forgets its origins or loses sight of its ideals, figures arise who often speak a strident message to summon them to return to God. In Israel’s history the prophetic movement represents such a phenomenon.

The prophets are generally “conservative” in the best sense of the word. They hearken back to the originating experiences of Israel to counter corrupting influences of urbanization and centralized power that developed under the monarchy.

Though the prophets criticize the misuse of power by those in authority, their message is reformist rather than revolutionary.

It has become axiomatic to say that Jesus was not a social reformer; nonetheless, his teachings and actions had strong social implications...

**Jesus is seen as summoning people to a renewed dedication to the primacy of God in their lives and to a deepened concern for their neighbor (the dual command of love). This command of love is made perfect in love and forgiveness of enemies.**

Jesus’ teaching is a summons to conversion that is to affect the way people live in the world.

Jesus’ parables contain frequent reversals... These reversals challenge deeply held values and invite people to enter imaginatively into a different world, providing a paradigm for the manner in which a new vision of social justice can be presented to people today.

The early [Christian] community is one that shares its goods in common and where there is no needy person. Shared possession rather than dispossession is the goal, and almsgiving is stressed... **In biblical terms almsgiving is not an exercise in optional charity, but an obligation in justice.**

Freedom for Paul is liberation from the self-serving and self-destructive aspects of “striving” and “boasting” in human achievements in order to direct one’s attention to the needs of others... **The justified and graced Christian is a person who seeks a community not of isolated individuals, but one in which concern for the weak and suffering is the touchstone of living according to the law of Christ.**

If the Bible is to remain a dialogue partner with issues of social justice, a continuing task will be to maintain the power of the biblical renewal so that the people of God, pastoral ministers, and church leaders will continue to be enriched and challenged by biblical texts... [A] new dogmatism is shown in the tendency to prefer the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* over biblical teaching and to ground theology and ethics almost exclusively in magisterial statements.

At the same time Catholic tradition and practice is not “biblicist.” The Bible will always be in dialogue with other sources... Christian tradition; philosophical methods, insights and principles; scientific information and methods that are relevant; and human experience, broadly conceived.