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Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just (Book Review)

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Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just

Timothy Keller. 2010. New York: Penguin Group. ISBN: 978-0-525-95190-2, \$19.95.

Reviewed by Nate Peach, Colorado State University

Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just is Timothy Keller's presentation of God's heart for the socially and economically disadvantaged. As the title implies, Keller's belief is that "the biblical gospel of Jesus necessarily and powerfully leads to passion for justice in the world" (p. xiv). "A life poured out in doing justice for the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true gospel faith" (p. 189). Keller uses passages from both the Old and New Testaments asserting that "the Mosaic laws of social justice reflect God's character, and that never changes" (p. 22). Grace should compel believers to strive to live in accordance with God's character and will. Jas. 2:17 states that faith without works is dead. Keller argues that God's view of justice is not limited to personal decisions; it is inherently social as well and should impact every aspect of our lives (pp. 11-12). The reader comes to see that to live a life that reflects the importance God places on justice requires fighting against injustice at every level where it occurs. Zech. 7:10-11 is used to provide a specific list of the types of people Christians are called to live justly towards: widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor. Keller then modernizes this list to include refugees, migrant workers, the homeless, single parents, and the elderly (p. 4). It is with these groups in mind and Keller's firm conviction of the life changing influence of grace that *Generous Justice* addresses how and why Christians should live justly.

In the introduction Keller lists his intended audience. He hopes to engage four broad categories of readers: those whose concern for social justice does not mark their everyday lives, those who are skeptical of the church's role in justice, believers who are actively involved with ministry that addresses spiritual and physical needs, and nonbelievers who are skeptical of Christianity being a force for justice in the world. Keller has the most to say to those whose faith has not resulted in a concern for or acting out of justice.

In the subsequent chapters numerous themes are built upon the foundation that God's grace motivates just living. The first theme of the book is that God's call of living justly requires personal sacrifice. On pages 93-97 Keller cites Deut. 10:16-19 and Isa. 58:3,5-7 as a basis for "circumcising our hearts." Reflecting God's love for the poor requires us

to love our neighbor as ourselves. Job 29:12-17 and Job 31:13-28 are used to argue that we should enter into the plight of the disadvantaged (pp. 10-15). Loving your neighbor as yourself requires action beyond charity. God's view of just living requires more than token actions. Self love is not limited to meeting only our subsistence needs. Job's "goal for the poor is a life of delight." To not live in this way "would have been a terrible sin and offense to God" (p. 14). To enter into another's misfortune requires financial, time, and emotional sacrifice. This is why our sin nature rebels against living out God's heart. The Macedonians provide an example of what it looks like to live this idea out. Their actions were not marked by selfish ambition; rather they gave out of their poverty versus abundance (2 Cor. 8:1-7). They understood their role as stewards of God's financial blessings rather than its owners. As Lk. 12:34 makes clear, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." As I read *Generous Justice*, I pondered whether my stewardship mirrors my gratitude for God's grace or my own selfish desires.

Referencing Lev. 19:15, Ex. 22:25-27, Jer. 22:13, Jas. 5:1-6, and numerous verses from Proverbs, Keller constructs the second theme. Keller believes that the biblical causes of poverty are a combination of micro-level decisions and macroeconomic conditions. These decisions and conditions are in turn influenced by institutional and social factors. The Bible's multi-faceted diagnosis of poverty suggests that simplistic solutions to poverty alleviation will be ineffective. Keller presents three levels to engage the causes and consequences of poverty: relief, development, and structural reform. Relief is designed to meet immediate needs, development should lead to freedom from aid, and social reform involves changing the institutional structure which leads to poverty (pp. 113-127). The reality of such a multi-faceted problem is daunting. As a discipline economists are trained to take on such a challenge. Our research can inform numerous poverty related issues ranging from education to minimum wage laws to healthcare reform. Scientific training may incline us to be dispassionate outside observers to the plight of the poor but God's will is that we share their burden. Knowledge without action represents an improper understanding of God's desire for justice.

Reflecting on the interaction of economics and justice I was challenged in numerous ways. Subconsciously, I began to wrestle with a criticism of neoclassical economics which took some time to identify. On page 13 Keller mentions payday lending as an entity which has the potential to exploit the poor. These lenders are known for easy-to-acquire loans with extremely high interest rates. Neoclassical economics would suggest

that the decision to take on such a loan is made rationally. Explanations for a seemingly irrational (or at least financially detrimental) decision include a high discount rate, inherent preferences, and so on. Despite these explanations, I remained troubled by the existence of these types of organizations.

As I pondered seemingly irrational decision-making, I read a blog post by Edward Glaeser (2010) which helped me identify my unnamed criticism. In this post Glaeser writes about the moral underpinnings of economics. He believes that the moral foundation of economics is the idea of freedom. He quotes great economic minds such as John Stuart Mill, “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it,” and Milton Friedman, “The most important single central fact about a free market is that no exchange takes place unless both parties benefit.” The post ends with “don’t think that our discipline doesn’t have a moral spine beneath all the algebra. That spine is a fundamental belief in freedom.”

What Glaeser (2010) does not address but Keller explicitly does is that in a postmodern world freedom as a moral imperative provides a weak “moral spine.” This is a weakness because society does not agree on what freedom is. Keller uses the debate over abortion as an example of this disagreement. Both pro-choice and pro-life arguments are made on the grounds of freedom and justice. The subconscious criticism became a tension between my economic training and God’s design for a life pleasing to Him. Freedom is not God’s moral imperative. As Christians we acknowledge limitations to our freedom as part of the process of sanctification. Returning to the payday lending example, I pondered the interaction of freedom and poverty. Is the freedom to take on a financially detrimental loan a freedom to protect? Can living justly mean attempting to limit others’ freedom? I do not know the answers to these questions. I believe Keller’s biblically motivated response to the payday lender example (and other similar scenarios) would be that Christians respond by using relief, development, and social reform to provide alternative avenues by which the poor need not enter financial bondage. The self examination that *Generous Justice* causes is perhaps the book’s best quality. As Christian economists, taking a moment to examine how our faith engages our profession is important.

Beyond abortion Keller does not address many specific contentious issues. For many this may be a weakness of the work. There are many contemporary issues where believers are in sharp disagreement over what

living justly looks like. These include but are not limited to issues related to same-sex couples, illegal immigrants, and climate change. The social aspect of living justly as related to these types of issues is not explicitly addressed in the Bible. It is easy to identify the tension between God's design and His mercy. I believe Keller wrote the book as a call to action rather than a step-by-step guide. Keller may have avoided these types of issues in order to engage a larger audience. Keller does explicitly mention that he believes it is wrong to punish children for parents' actions. A child should not be punished for his or her parents' decisions. The reader is left to seek out the appropriate way to live out God's will in a fallen world.

Generous Justice is a convicting presentation of God's heart for the most vulnerable members of society. Keller relies on the Bible to construct a convincing case that God wants believers to mirror His love. God's grace should provide the motivation for us to move beyond acts of charity to engage in a life of justice. We have been forgiven everything and out of gratitude we should strive to live as God calls us to. God's care for the poor is so deep that Jesus identifies them as His brothers. Upon Christ's return we will be accountable for our actions towards the poor: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matt. 25:40). Let us live so that we need not be afraid of our answer when we stand at the gates of eternity.

References

Glaeser, E.L. (2011, January 25). The moral heart of economics. Post to New York Times Economix blog. Retrieved January 25, 2011 from <http://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/25/the-moral-heart-of-economics/>. ■