



# The Role of Prayer in Working Toward Justice

BY RANDY BOHLENDER

It's no secret that we live in an unjust world. One only need to flip through the channels to see the multitude of ways in which injustice manifests itself around the planet. Walt Kelly's classic comic strip, *Pogo*, said it well: "We have met the enemy, and he is us." Consider the human trafficking of Asia, the politically motivated starvation in Africa and the genocide on the unborn here in the United States ... it seems the No. 1 predator of humanity has a frighteningly human face.

**R**epeatedly, we shake our heads and mutter, “Someone should do something ...” But what?

There are literally more ways to get involved than there are issues at hand. You can dish out hot soup, adopt an unwanted child or give money to an organization that will invest in bringing about justice ... but when the doing is done, have you done all you can? When the check has cleared, is your conscience appeased? Is your responsibility alleviated? Not if you’ve attempted to bring justice in an atmosphere void of prayer.

It seems there’s been a long-running divide between the doers and the pray-ers. For many years, most justice-oriented people have been busy doing the work of the Father, often at the expense of talking to Him. This is not said to cast a shadow over their legitimate efforts, only to point out that more can be done with prayer than without. Assuming your goal is really to do something about injustice (as opposed to just making yourself feel better), you’d do well to consider the role of prayer in your efforts.

The idea of doing justice in a prayerless context is something akin to a man rowing a boat with one oar. Effort is expended and motion ensues, but real progress is far less than could be found with both oars in the water. Prayer is such a vital part of the Christian justice movement that in the absence of prayer, there is no movement at all. Why pray?

#### PRAYER IS AGREEMENT WITH THE JUDGE OF THE EARTH.

There is a misconception about prayer that says prayer is begging God to do the right thing. In this model, we always know best. We feel that by praying, we are explaining the issue to God, who in turn will thump His giant palm against His forehead and say, “You’re right—that’s unjust! I never thought of that! Food for the poor! Quick!” It makes us into the Great Revelator and God into the mindless, heartless power supply. Nothing is further from the truth.

Psalms 37 tells us that the Lord loves justice. It’s not just something He is moved to do at our bidding—it is a core value He has held from the beginning. In Genesis, God charts the course for justice, telling the serpent that the day will come when his head will be crushed for the injustice he has inflicted on humanity. When we cry out for God to right wrongs, we’re not giving Him new information. Prayer for justice is prayer agreeing with His original plan that justice will be done.

To think of prayer in any other way is to make you the convincer and God the elderly, confused yet powerful being who needs to be talked into doing the right thing. Justice is in His heart in a way that we cannot begin to comprehend. He allowed His Son to die a violent death to make things right—He’s vested in justice, and He will see it through.

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—Walt Kelly





## PRAYER DISTINGUISHES CHRISTIAN ACTIVISM FROM HUMANISM.

In the late 1800s, William Booth was moved by the abysmal state of England's downtrodden. Booth took a two-fisted approach, meeting practical needs while offering a clear, concise presentation of salvation through Jesus. His work grew into the worldwide force known as the Salvation Army. In 1890, he released *Darkest England and the Way Out*, a treatise criticizing England's unjust system of imprisoning the poor for their debts (thereby creating a system by which those debts would never be paid).

Over the decades, the Salvation Army charted a path that many aid agencies followed, bringing both the story of Jesus and food and clothing to the needy. In recent years, though, a new humanitarianism has emerged. In 2008 every rock star, supermodel and B-list celebrity is touting a cause or raising awareness of things like AIDS, food for the poor and other areas. Most of these efforts are faith-neutral—or, more accurately, faithless. They meet the immediate, temporal need without addressing anything of eternal importance. They are hollow, well-meaning efforts at best; at their worst, they are manipulative attempts to help us feel better.

To the homeless man under a bridge, his immediate need is certainly not a Gospel tract. It's a bowl of soup. That being said, his ultimate need remains to be the message of Jesus, and a bowl of soup that warms his stomach but neglects to care for his eternal soul does not meet that need. Like William Booth, we must return to caring for both immediate and ultimate needs if we are to help people and change lives.

The prophet Isaiah warned us of God abandoning His people because of their tendency to “clasp hands with pagans” (Isaiah 2:6, TNIV). In the past few years, Christian leaders have often laid down the distinctives of the Gospel in order to collaborate with non-Christian organizations or even Muslim groups. While this certainly gets food in people's hands, that is all it does. The Church is certainly called to feed the poor, but it's also called to much, much more.

By the beginning of Acts 6, the early Church had a program for caring for the widows. Three chapters before that, though, they were praying for the sick and seeing them healed. It's doubtful that they abandoned praying for the sick to make room for the feeding program. Christian activism that does not involve Christ-centered prayer—both for and with those who need our help—is no different than non-Christian humanitarian efforts and, in all likelihood, presents a skewed perspective of Christ to the world.

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## PRAYER SERVES AS A LUBRICANT IN GEARS OF JUSTICE.

If you hang around people who are dedicated to righting wrongs in society, you notice a few commonalities. Most of them are motivated by deep compassion for society's victims. Most of them have made great sacrifices to meet the needs of others ... and sadly enough, some of them are really, really angry people.

It's understandable in some ways. If you think long and hard enough about what goes on in an abortion clinic, it's difficult not to develop animosity toward those who participate in the abortions. Additionally, those who openly oppose righteousness are often mean-spirited. Personally, I've stood in silent prayer in front of the Supreme

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Court along with a prayer ministry called Bound 4 Life—no signs, no chants, no antagonizing behavior, just silent prayer—only to have pro-abortion protesters stand inches behind me and my small children and yell some of the most vile things I've ever heard into our ears. It would be easy to justify turning around and knocking someone into the next week, in Jesus' name.

There has been a lot of un-Jesus-like activity in Jesus' name. Mean, ugly things have been screamed.

Hateful signs have been held up. Doctors have been shot. Clinics have been bombed. How is it that people standing up for righteousness can be so unrighteous and hateful?

It's simple. To stand for righteousness is to carry part of the burden of it. Actively working toward righting wrongs is, in fact, a form of intercession, standing in the gap between God and what is wrong, saying "This can be no more." If you stand there long enough and justice doesn't come quickly enough for you, the frustration that boils within needs to vent somewhere, and is often blasted toward those we see as the perpetrators of evil, particularly if the gears of justice are not oiled with the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Because of the intense nature of injustice, we must become people of prayer. Frustration can be fuel for justice for a while, but at some point, we must find a place of trusting in the fact that God is ultimately a just God, that He feels the pain of the oppressed at a level we don't and that even those who are perpetrating evil are people whose hearts He longs to know and love. Part of praying for justice is praying for mercy. Without that dynamic, we find ourselves on the right side of an argument but angrily positioning ourselves against the heart of God.

To work toward justice outside a context that includes prayer is to set ourselves up to be angry at people and ineffective in the grand scheme of things. To work toward justice even as we seek the face of God in prayer is to partner with the Judge of the earth. May we always focus our energy toward that end—being a co-laborer with Christ in righting wrongs from poverty to sickness, and on to combat the ultimate injustice of all, living and dying without knowing the love of God. 

RANDY BOHLENDER is a missionary serving The International House of Prayer, TheCall and the Luke18 Project. He lives in Kansas City, Mo., with his wife, Kelsey, and their four children. You can reach him at [rbohlender@gmail.com](mailto:rbohlender@gmail.com).