

## CHAPTER 3

# God's Heart for Justice

**B**efore he had reached his twenty-first birthday, Frank Abagnale Jr. was an international con artist who was wanted in over a dozen countries for check forgery and assuming at least eight different false identities. Abagnale claims to have worked as an assistant state attorney general in Louisiana, a hospital physician in Georgia, and a Pan American World Airways pilot.

He assumed the identity of a pilot so he could fly wherever he wanted for free. To do so, he called Pan Am and told them he was a pilot who had lost his uniform. They provided him with a new one. After getting the pilot's uniform, Abagnale forged a Federal Aviation Administration pilot's license and logged over two million air miles!

Abagnale ultimately spent over four years in prison but was then offered a job by the federal government to help them stop con artists such as himself.<sup>2</sup>

Our identity matters. When watching *Catch Me If You Can*, the movie that depicts Frank Abagnale's story starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Tom Hanks, I was fascinated to think about the false identities someone could take on and actually get away with it.

I wonder if you relate to Abagnale at all. Chances are you haven't developed a string of elaborate cons like him. But you may struggle to know your true identity. Does it come from what you've built? From what others think of you? Or from somewhere else entirely?

Here's the answer: Our truest identity doesn't come from what we do;

## THE JUST LEADER

it comes from God. We take on the identities God gives us that reflect His character and who He is.

As we begin our journey to understand what it means to be a just leader, our first step is to develop a clear picture of the way God feels about justice. We need to realize that justice isn't simply something God *does*. It's something God *is*. It's inherent to his identity.

If justice is central to God's very identity—if it is, as I'm claiming, his very heartbeat—then Christians should be incredibly familiar with the idea. But many of us seem to have overlooked the ways in which God talks about justice in our Bibles. The theme itself runs from cover to cover. We simply haven't taken it in.

If you're a person of faith, this is an unsettling truth. It's uncomfortable to be told that we're ignoring the very identity of the God we claim to follow. Allow that discomfort to convict you, but don't get stuck there. Instead, allow God's Spirit to guide you to know him better. It's not weakness, but wisdom, to admit we need to learn.

And if you *aren't* a person of faith, feel free to continue reading this book (and in particular this chapter) over the shoulders of us Christians. You'll agree with some aspects, and I imagine you'll disagree with others. Regardless, I hope you're encouraged by the principles we uncover and excited to see God's heart for justice.

### **WHAT IS BIBLICAL JUSTICE?**

The primary word for *justice* in the Bible is *mishpat*. It indicates a rectifying justice—making everything as it's supposed to be. When *mishpat* is in effect, people are treated equitably. They are given their rights or their due when they act rightly, and they are punished when acting wrongly.

*Mishpat*, in many ways, is the type of justice we understand—reward those who do well; punish those who break the rules or do evil.

But it goes even further than that. It's also restorative—providing restoration for those who are victims of injustice. And it's quite interesting

## GOD'S HEART FOR JUSTICE

to note that “the restorative side of *mishpat* is far more prominent in Scripture than the retributive side.”<sup>3</sup>

We see this as certain people groups are mentioned often with *mishpat*—orphans, widows, foreigners, the poor (referred to as the quartet of the vulnerable). One of the prophets, Zechariah, provides a characteristic mention of this quartet:

*Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart. (Zechariah 7:9–10, emphasis added)*

As Tim Keller noted in *Generous Justice*, the *mishpat* of a society (or its level of justness) is measured by how much it cares for and restores these groups of people.<sup>4</sup> A lack of doing this is a violation of justice.

*Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him. (Proverbs 14:31)*

God is saying our lack of caring for those in need around us is not just a bad idea or insensitive— it’s an insult to him. It’s like we are thumbing our nose at God, turning our backs and walking the other way.

I don’t know about you, but that scares me. I don’t want to be seen as someone who thumbs his nose at God.

The other Hebrew word used in Scripture to refer to justice is *tzadeqah* (SAH-dih-KAH). Unlike *mishpat*, which means “rectifying justice,” *tzadeqah* means “righteousness” or “primary justice.” It’s the idea that everything is in right relationship to everything else. We have a right relationship with God, ourselves, others, and creation. All of those relationships are governed by fairness, generosity, and equity.

Brian Fikkert and Steve Corbett write in *When Helping Hurts*:

## THE JUST LEADER

This verse should make a Christian pause. John compares the extent to which we care for those who are hurting and pursue justice to the level of God's love inside of us. If one is absent, so is the other. In other words, if we don't pursue justice for those in need, people can question whether God's love is even inside of us. Whoa!

If you are a Christian and you want to know whether your faith is real, check to see how much love and care you have for your brother or sister in need.

If you don't like the answer you're getting, don't look away. Turn to God and ask him to make things different. Ask him to make you different.

### **6. By spending ourselves for those in need, we experience the fullness of God and have our deepest needs met.**

*If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then shall your light rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. And the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire in scorched places and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail. And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in. (Isaiah 58:10-12)*

This verse is very important to understand. The prophet Isaiah is letting God's people know what a true fast is, one that God honors. Basically, a true fast is one in which you truly give yourselves to those who are broken and in need.

That much might not be very surprising. But the results are. Notice that he does not tell them the result is *for those who are broken and in need*. No, the result is for those who spend themselves for those in need, the ones who pursue justice. Read that again with my emphasis added:

*Your light shall rise in the darkness  
Your gloom will be as the noonday*

## GOD'S HEART FOR JUSTICE

*The Lord will guide you continually  
He will satisfy your desires  
He will make your bones strong  
You shall be like a well watered garden whose waters do not fail  
Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt  
You shall raise up the foundations of many generations  
You shall be called repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.  
(Isaiah 58:10–12)*

I don't know about you, but I would like my life to be characterized by the promises above. And God gives us the formula to experience them: "If you pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted." In other words, the path to *your* personal thriving and the path of justice don't meet like a fork in the road; they are one path. By pursuing one, you pursue the other.

This is what I experienced, in small part, with Don. And it's what Pastor McCoy and Chris understood when they pursued each other and ultimately started Jobs for Life. They were cultivating justice. But along the way, they learned that *justice* people are also whole people. Justice multiplies the fullness of God—not just in others, but in you.

Justice could not be more central to who God is and what he's about. If you are a follower of Jesus, it should be central to who you are and what you're about.

So, I want to ask you what might be an uncomfortable question: *Do you see yourself as a man or woman of justice?*

How does that sit with you? Do those clothes fit? Can you say, just like God does, "Hi, I'm [insert your name] and I'm a [(man/woman) of justice]"?

In fact, can you say the following?

- Justice is a part of who I am. It's in my DNA.
- Justice is what I love.

## THE JUST LEADER

- Justice is what I am on earth to do.
- Justice is what God commands me to do.
- Justice and mercy to those in need are inevitable signs of my justifying faith in God.
- By spending myself for those in need, I experience the fullness of God and have my deepest needs met.

Here's the bad news: None of us can muster up enough goodness to say those sentences, in good conscience, in our own power.

But here's the good news: If you love Jesus, and have been justified by him, *that's exactly who you are and what he's called you to be*—a man or woman of justice. What your ambition could never achieve, his Spirit can do through you.

Don't believe me? The Bible actually shows us a case study for this kind of transformation. One man, completely unable to (and uninterested in) pursuing justice, meets with Jesus.

And suddenly everything changes.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What did you learn about God's view of justice that you didn't know before?
2. How does God's definition of justice differ from the way the world defines justice?
3. Do you see yourself as a man or woman of justice?
4. How might your life change if you saw yourself as a man or woman of justice?
5. How might your leadership change if you saw yourself as a man or woman of justice?

## QUALITY 1

### **See the Whole Playing Field**

I grew up playing basketball. Every afternoon after school, I would go out to the driveway behind our house where we had set up a hoop, and I would shoot for hours. Friends would come over, and we'd have epic battles. We would lower the goal to seven or eight feet and play Dunkball, which essentially is normal basketball, but with the lowered goal, we could slam it in someone's face or go up for an alley-oop dunk! I'd wear a sweatband on my left forearm just like Michael Jordan did early in his career, and I'd act like I could levitate just like him.

But Michael Jordan I was not. Little did I know, my body was only three or four inches off the ground when I went up for the slam.

Most kids learning to play basketball gravitate to games like Dunkball, trying high-flying dunks or making crazy moves at the basket. Unfortunately, most coaches don't. Early on, they don't even want kids focusing on shooting and scoring.

Instead, coaches want players simply to learn how to dribble the ball. Why? For two main reasons: 1) Dribbling is the main way you get around the court. It's Basketball 101; and 2) You need to see the whole court, and you can't see anything if you're staring down at the ball.

I've heard coaches yell a thousand times, "Keep your head up!" Dribbling needs to be automatic, because in basketball, vision is everything.

When you have the ball, you not only need to see what you have to do, but you have to know what every player on your