The What, Why, and How of Just Living.

What: litany of injustices – add a story or two; can be brief.

So consider the life of the median person around the world. According to a recent study by National Geographic, the median person today is 28 years old, male, and Han Chinese. He is right handed, and literate, but not highly educated. He has a cell phone, but no bank account, and one traumatic life event will likely send him into poverty, because he makes less than $12,000 per year (PPP: purchasing power parity). He likely skips a meal now and then out of necessity, and could not even dream of getting the sort of elite education that you will receive.

That is the median person, and his life is fairly different from yours in many ways, but there are some recognizable similarities as well. Now let us consider someone from the other end of the spectrum from you entirely. After all, if you make at least $45,000 per year after graduation from college, which the vast majority of you will easily do, then you are going to be in the top 10% of the world in terms of your worth (top 1% in terms of income! And this is with a family of 4!).

What about the bottom 10%? Well, the bottom 10% of the world’s population lives in what the UN calls absolute or extreme poverty, meaning they live on less than $1.90 per day PPP (and that is a drastic improvement, by the way).

What is poverty? Puff Daddy says, “It’s all about the Benjamins baby. Uuuuh. Uh-huh. Yeah.” But Puff Daddy, shockingly, is wrong. Poverty is not a lack of money, it is a lack of all of the things money brings, such as food, water, security, peace, protection from the government and from gangs and thugs, assurance of a good future, a relatively stress-free life, and many more things. We could give tons of examples, but let’s just give a few:

* The bottom 10% is hungry. All of the time.
  + They spend between 60-80% of their income on food, while your family likely spends less than 10% of income on food (the lowest mark in all of history, by the way).
  + They still miss many meals, and 1 in 4 children is stunted in growth and health because of malnutrition. 3 million children die from malnutrition each year, about 1 every 5 seconds.
  + The single greatest cause of death remains malnutrition and the effects of hunger by most measures.
* Poverty means Unsafe Drinking Water. On average, you use over 100 gallons of pure water per day, much of it in your bath, flushing toilets, and watering lawns. The bottom 10% uses closer to 3 gallons of impure water per day, depending on where they live. Your water comes out of a tap, and you complain if it tastes a little bit of chemicals; much of the bottom 10% has to spend hours out of every day getting their water, and it is often deadly.
  + Globally, at least 1.8 billion people drink water contaminated by faeces, which contributes to rampant disease. Did you know that in much of the world, diarrhea can be a death sentence? How stupid is that? People in the 21st century still die of diarrhea and dehydration, things modern medicine reliably cured 150 years ago.
* Let’s switch gears: if you are poor, you are far more likely to end up in prison, especially in the US. Did you know that in the land of the free, we have 5% of the world’s population, but 25% of its prisoners? We have spent more money on prisons than any other infrastructure project
  + Combining the number of people in prison and jail with those under parole or probation supervision, 1 in every 31 adults, or 3.2 percent of the population is under some form of correctional control
  + Worse, there is a vast racial disparity, connected to a vast income disparity, in imprisonment. To give just one example,
    - 5 times as many Whites are using drugs as African Americans, yet African Americans are sent to prison for drug offenses at 10 times the rate of Whites
    - African Americans represent 12% of the total population of drug users, but 38% of those arrested for drug offenses, and 59% of those in state prison for a drug offense.
    - African Americans serve virtually as much time in prison for a drug offense (58.7 months) as whites do for a violent offense (61.7 months). (Sentencing Project)
    - Jail reduces work time of young people over the next decade by 25-30 percent when compared with arrested youths who were not incarcerated
* Poverty is not only racist, it is also sexist. Girls are far more likely to be illiterate than boys, and because of that have fewer options for what to do with the rest of their lives. Illiteracy, for many girls, is a sentence to lives of domestic servitude and even slavery.
* We could talk here about the exploitation of the poor, both in the US and abroad, about the many diseases that poor people still die of for no good reason, but let’s focus in quickly on child labor and slavery.
  + There are 168 million children worldwide trapped in child labor, accounting for almost 11 percent of the overall child population.
  + Nearly 60 percent of child labor takes place in agriculture, as these children working on cocoa plantations and coffee plantations show.
  + Children forced to work are more likely to be uneducated, unemployed, and destitute for the rest of their lives.
* And what about slavery? Did you know that according to the UN there are nearly 30 million slaves today, most of them women and children? There are slaves picking the cocoa for our chocolate and beans for our coffee and cotton for our shirts. There are slaves working in the US to clean, make clothes, and pick the tomatoes on your hamburgers at McDonalds. There are slaves working in sex slavery both in the US and around the world, many of them young girls under the age of 12. There are slaves fighting wars in Africa, slaves making bricks and rugs in India, and slaves working in the horse industry in central KY. There are more slaves today than during the entirety of the trans-Atlantic slave trade combined (mostly because there are so many people alive today, of course).
* Enough, you get the idea. To be born into poverty is to be born into a life with more than its fair share of pain. To be born into poverty is to be born into a life very likely to end in premature death. On average, your life expectancy is about 78 years of age. On average, the bottom 10% have a life expectancy less than half that. They are far, far more likely to die in infancy and in childbirth, to die of simple diseases and symptoms like diarrhea, and to die of violent conflict, terrorism, and war.
* I’m sure you know this, but there is plenty of poverty far closer to home. Almost one in five Kentuckians had incomes below the poverty line (meaning an income of $23,834 for a family of four) in the last census, and one in four KY children are born in poverty. Many such children will suffer from malnutrition, health problems, difficulty in focusing, and considerably less and worse education; they will be more likely to come from areas that have severe pollution, whether in Appalachia or in Urban areas, and far more likely to smoke, to do drugs, to be overweight, and to get life-threatening illnesses.

Why: in pop culture and in philosophy proper we can narrow this down to a few possibilities, mostly based on different ideas of rights.

* What’s mine is mine – If gotten by just means (not cheating); libertarianism, and somewhat Republican. Based on the right to keep what is properly gotten. Libertarianism.org: “Prosperity and property rights are inextricably linked.” (O’Driscoll and Hoskins)
  + This is our most common view in many ways, based on old German ideas of property rights. We see it in everything from our resistance to taxes and admiration of those that pay fewer taxes to our anger at the idea of imminent domain.
  + We are willing to give in charity, but we are royally ticked off when others try to take our “hard earned” (never easily earned, have you noticed that?) cash or property.
  + The second tries to keep these basic insights while allowing for the idea that we need to see to some needs:
* What’s mine is mine as long as everyone is minimally cared for by government and charity; roughly Democratic. Based on the right to basic goods and services, rather than to what I have earned.
  + Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):
    - Life, liberty and security of person
    - No one shall be held in slavery or servitude
    - No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment…
    - Right to own property
    - Right to free speech and expression
    - Right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, and to equal pay for equal work… ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection
    - Right to rest and leisure
    - Right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (25)
    - Right to education… directed to the full development of the human personality (26)
    - Right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits
  + Many more have been added specifying these rights more fully
  + Socialism – more extreme version of this that removes property rights entirely.

Are these biblical views of justice?

* Notice that the theme is not “Just Lifestyles.” The question is not what sort of lifestyles we can live and still be just (how much money can I keep? How much do I have to give to count as just? If I volunteer a lot, does that make up for also watching movies a lot? Etc.) These are the kinds of questions that the above accounts seem prepared to deal with: what do I have to do (notice the emphasis on duty) to count as just?
* \*\*\*flattens life, seems to make it all about one thing. In the world in which we live with rampant injustice, it seems to suggest that none of us should care about anything else, ever.
  + --Worship? Education? Family? Beautiful poetry or art? Jesus himself did not focus solely on alleviating injustice and poverty and pain.
* There is an older account of justice that seems to me to fit much better with the theme of Lifestyle Justice, and in interests of full disclosure, I should say that it is the account I study and believe to be a better ethical account anyway: a virtue account of justice.
* Not action based, but character based; not what do I need to do, but who do I need to be

Scriptures: but to *do* justly: Your job is to “do justly.” Let’s talk grammar for a minute. Justly, you will note, is an adverb – it is a small matter of annoyance to me that many versions now say “do justice” in this verse, which is a bit of grammatical nonsense – justice is not something you can do, it is something that you have. Do justly, on the other hand, is both grammatically correct and far more powerful. Adverbs, as you have undoubtedly learned, modify verbs, and the verb here is “do.” So the question is not “what am I to do” or “what *must* I do,” but rather, “how must I do every single thing that I do?” I must do it justly. Whether I am choosing cereal or socks, teasing my friends or working on my homework, walking past a beggar on the street or buying the newest iPhone, I must do that action justly to please God.

*Love* mercy – not be merciful grudgingly, painfully, and in a way that makes sure the wrongdoer feels just how merciful you are being, but in a way designed to heal the relationship – the true purpose of mercy. It may seem like this cannot go together with the former idea of doing justly (aren’t justice and mercy opposites?), but that would be wrong. Justice will be taken up into mercy, Thomas Aquinas argues – justice is the face of mercy in a world of inequity, deceit, wrongdoing, and pain, but it is an aspect of mercy, not its opposite.

Walk humbly with your God: walking is again a metaphor for a lifestyle, a way of being, and we are to be humbly; we are not to worry about ourselves or looking good, but about God’s desires and hopes for the world. Not that we are walking humbly *with God*; of course, if we really are walking with God, we won’t have to worry about the humility part – that is always a humbling experience. Have you ever taken a walk with someone? You find that you begin to take on their point of view on things and to notice the things they notice.

This fits well with the idea of virtues, for virtues are a matter of how you see the world.

* Consider a vice: how do you see the world if you struggle with avarice? In terms of money and goods, how many you can get and the threat of others taking them from you.
* So how do you see the world if you see with the eyes of justice?
  + Beatitudes; contrast sermon on the plain (poor, hungry and thirsty, etc.)

I don’t think this is a crowd that will worry much about this, but let me quickly address a constant worry: doesn’t this make life about what we do, rather than about faith?

* Ephesians: We are not saved by works, but we are saved for them

But how do you become like this? More important, perhaps, how do we make our children like this?

* Assume you all do care. Why? What made you care? Think about how this came about for you.
  + Habituation account
* So how do we raise children who care about justice? How do we form our church communities? In many ways!
  + Sunday Schools for kids on issues of justice
  + Church-based community gardens
  + Prison Ministries
  + Things that fight commercialism – for example, St. Nicholas Day
  + Fair Trade coffee or breakfast
  + Wrap chap sticks or become involved in other ways to fight human trafficking
  + Support foster parenting
  + Spend time with those who do not have justice as a church body

What will be the ripple effects of that?

* Releasing the prisoners, etc. – recognize this from Luke, the gospel of justice, where Jesus quotes Isaiah in his first sermon in Nazareth

THIS IS TOO HARD! What was that nice account that just told me exactly how much I have to do again?

Grace:

You can never be good enough, so never quit striving in all that you do.

You can never be good enough, so embrace the grace of failure and relax. Then try again.