

Gospel and Restoring Shalom

Meaning of Shalom: In the Creation story of *Genesis 1*, we repeatedly see God examining His creation and calling it “good”, and after He created man and woman, He saw everything and called it “very good” (*Gen 1:31*). In *Prov 8:30-31*, God rejoiced in His creation and delighted in humanity. Cornelius Plantinga, a theologian, calls it **shalom** — “A webbing together of God, mankind, and all creation in justice, harmony, fulfilment, and delight”. The Hebrew word “**shalom**” is an essential value of the Kingdom of God. Shalom is far greater than just “peace”. Shalom is **a delight in wholeness that flourishes in all aspects of existence and togetherness**. It is a relationship that grows in which God and humanity (individually and in community) and all creation delight in each other. A picture of shalom is like when different colourful threads are woven together tightly to make a rich and beautiful carpet. Besides being the Creator, God is also the source that makes this rich wholeness flourish.

God gave man the earth to rule. We know that the fall of man was humanity choosing to live independently of God and thereby being cut off from the source that makes shalom possible in this world. Without the source, shalom was lost. This is evident by the continual strife and exploitation in world history — strife between nations causing war, strife within families causing pain, exploitation of creation by humanity causing pollution, climate change and scarcity of resources, and exploitation of the weak (women, children, fatherless, widows, poor, strangers etc.) by the rich and the strong. Individual threads in the carpet are coming apart. The rich and beautiful carpet of shalom is no more beautiful. It looks ugly.

Besides God being the Creator bringing in shalom, He is also the Redeemer, restoring the broken shalom. When God redeemed the Jews from slavery in Egypt, He restored shalom. Our Lord Jesus is the true Redeemer, reconciling God and man and between each other in humanity. Shalom is a characteristic of the Trinitarian God, and He is committed to restoring it in His creation.

The Old Testament uses two important words to give us an understanding of God’s heart and desire for “shalom” in His creation: **Righteousness and Justice**. They are used 68 times in the Old Testament. They are deeply connected and are often used interchangeably. They are the foundation of God’s throne and an indispensable part of knowing God.

Ps 89:14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you (also Ps 97:2, Jer 9:23- 24).

Righteousness. When we think of righteousness, we often think of integrity and sexual purity. It is certainly both of these, but also much more. We could sum it all up by saying it is the right way to live so that **shalom prevails** on earth. It means to love God with all your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbour as yourself. If everybody followed this, we would be aligned with God and avail of His power to live rightly with our neighbour. **Righteousness is, therefore, “Prevailing Shalom”**. But, because of sin, we are not rightly aligned with God in the first place; therefore, it is impossible to be rightly aligned with our neighbour. Then, shalom is destroyed. Our Lord Jesus is the true Redeemer. He brought peace between God and man and between man and man. The evangelical creed begins with rightly aligning ourselves with God (the source) by repentance and faith in Christ, our Saviour and Lord. It all starts with the gospel that changes our heart from stone to flesh and with having God’s law written in our heart, causing us to move in His ways (*Ezk 11:19, 36:26*). But we must remember that His ways are always to restore shalom in His creation. Therefore, the church must reach out to society both in proclaiming God’s word and demonstrating God’s heart to restore shalom by deeds of justice and mercy to deliver people from evil in society. **Biblical Justice is “Restoring Shalom”**.

Biblical Justice. When we think of “justice,” we often think of our fundamental human rights —the right

to believe, do and say what we want, etc. — all, of course, without breaking the law of the land. We also think of justice as retributive justice— that is, if a person violates the law of the land, he must be punished accordingly. But biblical justice goes **far** deeper than this. The best way I could define **biblical justice is that it is “restorative shalom”**. Shalom has been continually broken by sin that causes strife, selfishness, greed, exploitation and disparity. Biblical justice must constantly work towards restoring shalom. Once we understand this, we will realise that Biblical Justice is relational and must include mercy and faithfulness (consistent action) towards our fellowmen (Ps 89:14, 97:2). Biblical Justice becomes far more than impersonal legislation. Biblical Justice is an essential mark of a right relationship with God.

Outline of Biblical Justice (Restorative Shalom)

1. Biblical Justice is essential to a right relationship with God
2. Biblical Justice is being partial towards the vulnerable sections of society.
3. Biblical Justice is sharing what you have with the poor
4. Biblical Justice is to speak for those who can't speak for themselves.
5. Biblical Justice is being a Good Samaritan
6. Biblical Justice must include conflict resolution between communities.
7. Biblical Justice must have a strong foundation of effective prayer to succeed.

1. Biblical justice is essential to a right relationship with God

Chris Marshall, an eminent Christian and highly respected Professor of Law at Victoria University, Wellington, New Zealand, says in his book, “The Little Book of Biblical Justice,” — *“Without the commitment to seek justice, all other means of worshiping God are bankrupt. A lifestyle of justice is the essential mark of holiness”*.

Marshall's remark is blunt but biblical. Amos 5:21-24 below tells us of God's people who observed proper religious practices (*verses 21-22*) and even exuberant worship (*v23*) and were yet despised by God because they failed in justice and righteousness (*v24*)

Amos 5:21–24: I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. ²² Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. ²³ Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. ²⁴ But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Our Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for the same reason of being religiously correct but neglecting the indispensable part of biblical justice.

Matt 23:23 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practised the latter without neglecting the former.

In *Isaiah 58* below, the Lord shows this disconnect between religious practice and observing justice very clearly:

Isa 58:1-7 “Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the descendants of Jacob their sins. ² For day after day they seek me out; they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God. They ask me for just decisions and seem eager for God to come near them. ³ ‘Why have we fasted,’ they say, ‘and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?’ “Yet on

the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers. ⁴ Your fasting ends in quarreling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists. You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high. ⁵ Is this the kind of fast I have chosen, only a day for people to humble themselves? Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed and for lying on sackcloth and ashes? Is that what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶ "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? ⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?

v1: God tells Isaiah to declare loudly to His people that they are rebellious, even though they “seemed” to be doing all the right religious things very well. They diligently and daily sought God’s face through Bible study, prayer with humble fasting (vs 2-3)

But, as mentioned in vs 4-7, they neglected to do **the indispensable parts of having a right relationship with God**—which are:

v4: having a right relationship with fellow men.

v3b: giving just wages to their workers and not exploiting them.

v6: breaking structures of injustice in society.

v7: feed and clothe the poor, the naked and the refugee (*poor wanderer*) and treat them as a family (*your flesh and blood*).

v6 is essential because not only must we pay just wages (v3), but we must be active in breaking the structures in society that promote or sustain injustice, exploitation and poverty. How can we do that? There are many ways.

By educating the poor. Christians (Catholic and Protestant) have been involved institutionally and individually, educating the poor and mentoring the fatherless and underprivileged — for centuries in different parts of the world with excellent results in lifting the poor and breaking the cycle of poverty.

By social activism: Historically, we know of Wilbur Wilberforce in Britain around 1800, coming against the obnoxious slave trade, and Martin Luther King Jr. against segregation and racism in the US around 1960. Both Wilberforce and King were excellent evangelical Christians, and both were used tremendously by God.

My close friend and gospel collaborator, Pastor Chandrakant Shourie, a Brahmin convert, worked to help liberate the Lower caste (Shudras) and Outcastes (Dalits) from severe caste oppression in Central India for over 25 years with great danger to himself and his family. He successfully fought over 500 cases of oppression and intimidation through public awareness of biblical justice that the government and bureaucracy had to give in. His work contributed to forever changing the political scenario in Central India, which was till then dominated by upper-caste Hindus.

Liberation Theology, started by a Dominican Catholic priest, Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino from Peru, has spread rapidly in South America, especially Brazil, since 1950. Merino popularised “dignity of the poor” and “preferential option for the poor”. These phrases are biblically based and adopted by the Catholic Church. They greatly influenced me as I grew up as a Catholic. They still do. Merino taught that doctrine and practice have a circular relationship. Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) said doctrine and practice cannot be equal; doctrine comes first! I agree with Ratzinger’s caution because one must first be rightly related to God by repentance and faith in the gospel (doctrine) to push back our inborn selfishness and receive His power to rightly associate with man (practice). At the grassroots level, Liberation Theology, when done without God’s power and love, can be mistaken for reactionary Marxism.

By justice ministries: These Christian ministries help the state official law enforcement agencies investigate and prosecute criminal networks that deal with the sex-slavery and bonded labour in many counties

worldwide. They also care for the victims of these trades. They have been remarkably successful in bringing down these criminal networks. Sex slavery is the second largest illegal worldwide trade after the drug trade.

2. Biblical justice is being partial to the vulnerable sections of society.

If we have resources, our priority would be to help the weak. Ignoring them would be unjust and wicked, as shown in point 3 below. Why? Because they are most susceptible to exploitation —and not to favour them would be an injustice. God sides with the poor, the orphan (fatherless), the stranger (refugee), widows, women and children because of their vulnerability. The Old Testament mentions it 38 times, and several times in the New Testament. Here are some scriptures:

Deut 10:17-18 For the LORD your God is God of gods and LORD of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. ¹⁸ He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing.

Isa 1:17 Learn to do right! Seek justice and defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

James 1:27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

3. Biblical Justice is sharing what you have with the poor

Not to do so would be injustice and offensive to the Lord.

Prov 29:7 The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no concern. (Also read Prov 28:27, 19:17)

Bruce K. Waltke, a very senior Evangelical Christian theologian and a Hebrew scholar, says the Hebrew meaning of “wicked” is people who see their resources as belonging to them and them alone. Whereas, in Hebrew, the righteous people see that much of what they have belongs to the community, the wicked say no, it’s all mine.

Among Indian Evangelicals, my close friend and gospel collaborator, Pastor Nitin Sardar, who leads Dinbandhu Ministries, is outstanding. Dinbandhu means “Friends of the Poor”. They operate in Central India. Nitin has financially supported over 1,000 widows and families of farmers who committed suicide due to crop failure in drought. He has dug over 2000 bore wells for water in drought-affected villages. He runs boarding schools for children of the most downtrodden tribals. He fed over two hundred thousand families in the villages during the pandemic in 2020-22. He has built fishing boats and a refrigerated supply van for the fishermen in the lakes of Central India. And these are just a few I have known among the many Nitin has done.

4. Biblical Justice is to speak for those who can’t speak for themselves.

Prov 31:8-9 Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”

I worked amongst the street people of Mumbai for many years, and my eyes opened to notice how vulnerable they were and why we needed to speak and work for them.

Besides being illiterate, most of them couldn’t add figures more than ten. They were unemployable and lived by begging, drug peddling and prostitution. They were lawless and trusted no one. They were habitual liars even if there was no profit or danger to tell lies. Many were raped in their early teens (both girls and boys) on the streets at night. They had no one to listen to their complaints. They were emotionally fragmented. They did not know what to do with their dead. They gathered around the corpse and cried till the Municipality came, picked it up like a pile of rubbish, and cremated it. They couldn’t avail of the public

hospitals because they couldn't fill out the forms, and no one was interested in them. They were faceless because people ignored them daily.

5. Biblical Justice is being a Good Samaritan:

We all know the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:25-37*). But why did Jesus choose religious types (Priests and Levites) and pit them against the behaviour of a Samaritan (people whom the Jews despised for their compromised religion)? Jesus was making a point that there must always be a connection between true religious faith in an individual and compassionate work in reaching out to your disadvantaged neighbour.

Many years ago, I preached a sermon on the Good Samaritan. I made a point between "Primary love and Secondary love". I said that **Secondary Love** is when one gives money to an institution that uses skilled workers to do works of justice, compassion, etc. This is good and must be encouraged. But **"Primary Love"** is when I see a need myself and attend to it myself and not pass by and say I have given money to an institution, and now it's their work and not mine to reach out to meet this need. The Good Samaritan was showing "Primary Love". Here are some examples of simple acts of primary love that had the Spirit of Christ in the Good Samaritan.

Two young Christian men, around 20 years of age, were having a casual evening stroll in a well-to-do area of South Mumbai. They saw a poor man, probably deranged, soiled in his trousers, insects all around him and people avoiding him. They decided to help. They carried this man to a nearby apartment, knocked on the door, and asked for a bucket of water, soap and a towel. To their surprise, an internationally well-known gentleman opened the door and gave them all they wanted. They bathed the man and restored his dignity.

A young Indian computer engineer immigrated to the US and got a job there. On Sundays, after church, he would go with blankets and food to a dangerous city area where the poor lived. He would take blankets, clothes and food to them. He said he felt the glory of God upon him when he did this.

A middle-aged Christian couple saw a gorgeous young woman and her three-year-old daughter standing on the roadside in Central Mumbai. The young woman was deranged, screaming and yelling the whole time. She was dirty, and her only bath was when it rained. No one could approach her. They visited her daily for a week, giving biscuits to the young child. Then, one day, they invited the young woman to their home for a bath. She accepted the invitation, which began her and her daughter's road to rehabilitation. Her daughter is an educated and confident young woman today.

A senior missionary and his team of young disciples would go every Monday morning with coffee and sandwiches and meet the street people in Mumbai as they woke up. One morning, they saw a pregnant woman in labour about to give birth to a child on the street. They rushed to a nearby hospital, but the authorities refused to send their medics because of red tape and liability. Andy asked for some basic medical instruments, medicine and cotton. And with it, he and his team delivered the baby on the street. Later, a young Indian pastor and his wife adopted that miracle baby.

There are many interpretations of *Matt 25:35-46*, the story about the end-time judgment between the sheep and the goats. I would like to include the "Spirit of Christ in the Good Samaritan" among them. I am not suggesting that good works can save you. For our Lord Jesus is the only Savior. But when Jesus tells us the parable of the Good Samaritan, I believe He meant that true faith in Him will result in His Spirit moving in us, resulting in "Primary Love" — the Spirit of Christ in the Good Samaritan. I would encourage all Christians to seize the opportunity with Primary Love. It's part of Biblical Justice and part of *Matt 25:35-36*.

6. Biblical justice must include conflict resolution to restore shalom in society.

Yes, we all know the Matthew 18:15-35 principle of conflict resolution between individuals. It is easy to preach but difficult to practice, leaving unresolved conflicts that linger for decades, even generations. But,

disputes between nations and ethnic groups are even more challenging. Here, I want to relate a personal experience where God used me to resolve a conflict between two very hostile groups in India — between Hindus and Muslims immediately after the Hindu-Muslim Riots in Mumbai in Dec 1992-Jan 1993. Several areas in Mumbai were burning. Curfew was barely lifted, the streets were still deserted, and the Lord told me to go out and meet the riot-affected people. I went to a nearby slum colony, “Tulsiwadi”, near Mumbai Central, with 1000 litres of milk given to me by the Salvation Army. A quick survey showed me that 300 hutment homes were burnt to the ground, 250 more were severely damaged but repairable, about 2000 people were homeless but clung to their ground space where their hutments stood, many were injured and needed medical aid, many more were traumatised and needed healing and virtually everybody there was filled with mistrust, bewilderment and anger — both Hindus and Muslims.

I started alone but was later joined by a small team from our church (which was a church of the poor). I worked there for six months, daily from 8 am to 3 pm. I opened a dispensary with the help of a qualified nurse who volunteered. Later, a pastor from another church, a close friend, supplied me with clothes, blankets, grain, utensils, etc.—many essentials needed to start life from nothing. I prayed for the injured, saw remarkable healings, prayed for the traumatised, and saw a smile return to their faces. Then, some senior Muslim and Hindu leaders from the slum colony came to me, and we began to talk. God came in and brought amazing and unbelievable reconciliation. We formed a committee, and I acted as a facilitator. Soon, money started pouring in from various sources. We rebuilt all the 300 hutment homes and repaired the 250 that were damaged. The quality of the new construction was far superior to what they had before. I estimate the rebuilding and repair cost about Rs. 1 crore (Rs. 10 million or US \$ 250,000) at 1993 prices. It would be considerably more today. Every rupee came from Indian sources -- from the Government, well-wishers, and mainly Muslim charities. But we didn't take anything from the West.

The conflict resolution was so thorough that we had a Sport's Day in the Mumbai University Stadium to celebrate the rebuilding, where over 300 youth of Tulsiwadi Slums, both Hindus and Muslims, participated in athletics, cheered by their parents. The local YMCA graciously gave the prizes and arranged for the referees who were of national stature and felt privileged to volunteer their services.

The main lesson I learnt from this is that the Lord led me to look at the entire project first with eyes of compassion and then **objectively to restore shalom**. I wasn't looking at this project through the evangelical grid.

I revisited Tulsiwadi in 2010, 17 years after the riots, and saw that a measure of shalom still existed. I shot a video with some leading players there and posted it on YouTube. It is slightly over 4 minutes in length. Here is the link if you are interested: <http://bit.ly/1L6URdm>

But if you read the over two hundred thousand comments on the video, you would realise that the hurt and hate in India between Hindus and Muslims persists throughout the country. Against this backdrop, you would appreciate the miracle of God to restore shalom just after an awful riot between the communities in Tulsiwadi.

7. Biblical Justice requires a foundation of effective prayer to succeed.

Our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the supernatural powers of darkness (*Eph 6:12*). The intensity of hate and unforgiveness between communities in conflict is undoubtedly reinforced by these evil powers. To ignore them and work is futile. Only a strong foundation of effective prayer (righteous, persistent, united, scripture-based, and working with humility) will disarm them.

Again, in 2002, there were widespread Hindu-Muslim riots in Gujarat — about 500 km north of Mumbai. I sent a team of intercessors from Mumbai to quietly walk the streets there, plead God's mercy and pray for communal harmony. After prayer- walking for 8 hours, they returned. That was our commitment to restore shalom.