

We have talked about many of the attributes of God over the last three years, but the one that we will talk about today, requires us to think on a level of clarity that is uncommon for most of us. It requires us to have a sense of sobriety, of seriousness, a sense of what's at stake if we're really going to hear from God. So I would encourage you, that even as we get started, that you pray and say, "Lord, I'm a human being, and like all human beings, I have practiced and become very good at denial. I've learned how to fool myself. I've learned how to fool other people. I've learned to play all kinds of games, but I need you to take the spiritual wax out of my ears, and to take off any calluses that are on my heart. I need you to help me hear clearly and to see accurately today."

It doesn't matter if I am on an airplane or in an airport or in a conversation in a local context there are two questions that almost always come up once someone finds out I am a pastor.

Two Questions that disturb believers and unbelievers alike:

1. Why do bad things happen to good people?

One form or another of this question is asked. When we see a current event that involves great loss of life like 9-11 or more recently a tsunami we wonder where God is in those kinds of events. We have become calloused in some ways because recently tornados swept through the Midwest and although over forty people were killed not all that far from us I never heard the question once. That lack of interest and compassion is for another sermon but I find it unnerving as a man responsible to lead a church. I have sat by the bedside of dying people both young and old and wondered about timing and life and death.

But there is a second question that has also been asked and I think most of us that are trying to follow God and His ways might be inclined to ask this one.

2. Why do good things happen to bad people?

It's the corporate person or politician that cheats others out of things and then prospers in the process, sometimes by millions of dollars. It's the person that cheats on a test and gets by with it while others struggle to do it the right way. It's the person the word "jerk" was named for that seems to get away with taking advantage of those around them that makes us wonder about justice.

A critical life lesson to learn early . . . "Life's not fair!"

These two questions have something that prompts them. The real issue is life's not fair. The problem with the "bad things happen to good people," is that it's not fair. The problem with the "good things happen to bad people," is that life's not fair. You don't have to have a super high IQ to say, "Okay, life doesn't seem very fair." Now who created life? God. If God created life, then the real question is: Is God fair? Is God just? Does He judge rightly? It's a great question and one that I want to seek to answer as we look at yet another of God's holy attributes: God's justice!

So first of all I need to put this in the context of a healthy world view. Every Christian should have a world view based on God's word.

Let me help you with a Biblical world view. I want you to imagine a timeline. What your world view and my world view tell us is this: That before time began; we have Genesis Chapter 1, and Genesis Chapter 2. God created a perfect, fair, just environment where He loved His people that He had created. He gives them the world. He says, “Be fruitful and multiply.” He has intimate communion with them and it is a perfect paradise or environment. That’s the first two chapters of human existence.

Then there’s a parenthesis. In Genesis Chapter 3, there is a coup. There is a rebellion. There is an entrance of sin into the world and with that comes a judgment. Sin is judged. Mankind is taken out of the garden. The tree of life is now guarded by an angel, so that this death or separation will not be permanent. What we have in the Bible and what we have in our experience is called the “fall.” You live in a fallen world. What we know is the world that we live in is not the world God intended. We live in a world that has cancer. We live in a world that has disease. We live in a world that does not reflect the goodness and purity and the wholeness of God.

So in this parenthesis, the whole story of mankind’s history is Genesis Chapter 3, you’re inside of a parenthesis. You have the story of the Old and of the New Testament and all the way into the entire rest of the Bible, all the way up to Revelation Chapter 20, is God working with people in light of a fallen world and His redemptive plan. In Chapter 20, you have another judgment and it’s called “the great white throne judgment,” where God takes all the injustice, and all the pain, and all the bad things done to good people, and all the good things done to bad people, and He takes all the scales, and says that a day will come when He will make everything right. He will judge all men, of all time, according to their works. Then the parenthesis ends and we’re in Revelation Chapter 21 and there’s a new heaven and there’s a new earth and it’s a perfect environment, and there’s no pain, and there is no tears, and everything will be as it should be again.

But here’s what you need to remember, is that you live inside the parenthesis. God is just. God is fair, but you live in a fallen world where His justice is not meted out in space, time, and history, in a way that is corollary to what we think ought to be when it actually happens. So there are injustices. Life is not fair – if you haven’t figured that one out. Life is not fair in a world where sin dominates, but it raises a very, very important question. How can we trust God in a world that is fallen? How can you depend on a God where life doesn’t seem fair? How can we learn to think soberly and clearly about what it means inside the parenthesis of Genesis 3 to Revelations 20? How do we live this life and worship God, who is just in the midst of a fallen world? That’s what I want to talk about today.

### **Let’s define the “The Justice of God”**

- Revealed through Abraham Genesis 18:25 (NLT)

*Surely you wouldn’t do such a thing, destroying the righteous along with the wicked. Why, you would be treating the righteous and the wicked exactly the same! Surely you wouldn’t do that! Should not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?”*

- Revealed through the Psalmist Psalm 97:1-2 (NLT)

*The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice! Let the farthest coastlands be glad. <sup>2</sup> Dark clouds surround Him. Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.*

You could do a little study on your own; Job 8:3, Job 40:6, Psalm 11:7, Psalm 45:6, Isaiah 51:6, Isaiah 30:18, Zephaniah 3:5. Here's what I want you to hear. Old and New Testaments proclaim over and over again, "God is just. God is righteous. God is just. God is righteous. God is fair." It is the foundation of His throne, the basis of how God deals with everything, God will never give anyone a raw deal. It's what His justice is all about.

*" . . . it becomes clear that the Bible's proclamation of God's work as Judge is part of its witness to His character . . . It shows us also that the heart of the justice which expresses God's nature is retribution, the rendering to men, what they have deserved; for this is the essence of the judge's task. To reward good with good, and evil with evil, is natural to God. So, when the New Testament speaks of the final judgment, it always represents it in terms of retribution. God will judge all men, it says, 'according to their works' (Matthew 16:27; Revelation 20:12f)." J. I. Packer, *Knowing God**

Will you circle the word retribution in your notes? "The heart of justice, which expresses God's nature, is retribution." Do you know what retribution is? You do this; therefore, you get this for doing it. Now he goes on to explain. "The rendering to men what they have deserved for this is the essence of a judge's task. To reward good with good and evil with evil is natural to God."

So when the New Testament speaks of the final judgment, it always represents it in terms of retribution. "God will judge all men," it says, "according to their works." At the heart of this concept of justice is this, everyone gets what they really deserve. No one will ever get a raw deal. Inside this parenthesis, in a fallen world, everyone is not going to get what they really deserve inside the parentheses, at the time, in a one-to-one correlation with how events occur. But even though we live in a fallen world where sin mars our concept and the timing of justice, God wants you to know that He's just, that He's fair, that as you trust Him in the big picture of this all-knowing sovereign all-wise God, you will never, ever be treated unfairly. That means that you can trust Him.

### **How Does God Reveal His Justice to Us?**

- Through the Natural Order

<sup>8</sup> *But God shows His anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. <sup>19</sup> They know the truth about God because He has made it obvious to them.*

<sup>20</sup> *For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see His invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God. Romans 1:18-20*

No matter where you find yourself on this planet you will find that human beings have figured out some form of punishment/justice to believe in. Even in pop culture people believe in some kind of retribution for bad behavior. In eastern religions if you don't behave you are going to come back as an ant or a grasshopper but if you do really well you get to come back as a cow!

- Through the Human Heart Romans 2:15-16; Acts 28:3-6

God has put on the human heart, totally apart from scripture, a sense of ought or should, of right or wrong, on a conscience that bears witness.

Long before I became a Christian, and long before the spirit of God was living in my life, I clearly knew certain things were right and certain things were wrong, and when I either thought or did the things that were wrong, what happened to my conscience? It condemned me and said, "Wes, that's bad. That's wrong."

People have always believed in cause and effect. Let me illustrate it right from the Bible. In Acts 28:3-6 there is the story of the Apostle Paul looking for wood in a pagan land. (Malta)

*As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, bit him on the hand. <sup>4</sup> The people of the island saw it hanging from his hand and said to each other, "A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live." Here is an example of people believing that bad things happen to bad people only.*

*<sup>5</sup> But Paul shook off the snake into the fire and was unharmed. <sup>6</sup> The people waited for him to swell up or suddenly drop dead. But when they had waited a long time and saw that he wasn't harmed, they changed their minds and decided he was a god.*

Now they reverse what they think about Paul. He must be good.

- Through His Role as Judge Hebrews 12:23; 2 Timothy 4:8; John 5:22

God is the judge of all the earth, even in a fallen world until eternity gets on the other side of Revelation 20. The scales will be balanced perfectly and justly for every situation at the last and final judgment. It is nearly impossible at times to see God as a judge because it seems that bad people get away with things that you know are very displeasing to God and that they are even rewarded for it. (For example, the people who produce the filth that comes from Hollywood.)

Hebrews 12:23 says, *You have come to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God Himself, who is the judge over all things*

II Timothy 4:8 says, *"Now there is in store for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, The righteous Judge will award me on that day – and not only me, but also those who have longed for His appearing."* Then if you want to know the role of Jesus and judgment, John 5:22 says, *"Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son."* God reveals

His justice in a fallen world through the natural order of the human heart, His role as judge and forth and profoundly, yet again, at the cross.

- Through the Cross Romans 3:25-26 NIV

*God presented Him (Jesus) as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood. He did this to **demonstrate His justice**, because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished- He did it to demonstrate His **justice** at the present time, so as to be **just** and the one who **justifies** those who have faith in Jesus.*

To demonstrate His justice that He might be just and also the one who justifies. God is consistent in His character. What you need to understand is that the cross is God's justice in action. God did not wink at your sin and my sin and say, "You know what? It's just sin and its not a big deal." There are actual consequences to this kind of behavior and thought that is righteous. This is sin, cause, this is effect. God didn't say, "Oh, let's just quit that rule for a while. I'm the God of the universe. I can change whatever I want. Let's just say its okay." No, God's standard is even placed upon Himself.

That's why the only solution for a relationship with a God that is 100% holy, is there needed to be a sacrifice that is 100% holy. The reason that Jesus was fully God and fully man is that it could only be the death of God that could pay the price, but only man could die so now what? So He was only born of a virgin, fully man, fully God, without confusion, the Messiah comes and when He hung upon the cross, He became your payment and my payment for sin, so that as 1 Peter 3:18 says that God, once and for all, has done what? He has drawn us to Himself, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God. What He did was, Christ once died for sin. The just Christ for the unjust me and you, that He, Christ, might bring us to the Father.

Here's a holy, righteous God and He sees it and it's the price tag of freedom, but He hates it. What it does is makes him angry. Anger is not a wrong or bad emotion. Wrath is a response to correct something, and so God took His just wrath – have you ever seen a child abused?

I attended a little league game this week and was in shock at a parent (a big tough guy) yelling at his little girl and even other girls on the team. I realized that having me come to your kids games might be hazardous. I was angry. I was angry at the humiliating and abusive words of an adult and I was angry at other adults who turned their heads and acted like it was normal. In my mind I'm like why aren't we jumping on this guy. Why is no one confronting him? Why is no one coming to the protection of little girls? It wasn't just a tough guy either, it was a couple of mothers as well and I was floored. That's called "righteous anger."

If I, as a little, tiny human being can feel that way about a child I don't know, how do you think God feels about all of the sin that has infiltrated this planet and has caused all of the heartache, all the suicides, all the broken relationships, all the diseases that have marred and caused this cancer to destroy the world that He made and the world that He loves and the people that He cares about? The only solution for Him to be both just, to be holy and yet to be loving and good, was to have His Son, the perfect sacrifice to hang on that cross. As He hung on that cross, God the Father, turned away and He took His wrath and He poured it on Jesus and all the just wrath

of God was placed on Him instead of you. He offered a solution but people have to accept it or there will be judgment someday. I think we have a generation of people that don't understand how lost we are. We think that we're basically kind of good people and we don't understand the holiness of God. Therefore, we don't grasp the significance of the love of God, and we don't grasp, at all, that God being just had to deal with us in a way that would cost Him the life of His Son. See, His justice, even in a fallen world, is revealed through the natural order of human hearts, His role as judge, through the cross and finally, through the promise of eternal retribution.

- Through the Promise of Eternal Retribution

For Believers 1 Corinthians 3:10-15    For Unbelievers Hebrews 9:27

Someday every person living and all who ever lived will stand before God to be judged. He will examine our work on this earth. We will be judged first of all by whether or not we have accepted Christ as our Savior. We will also be judged and held accountable for the work we have done on this earth. (1 Cor. 3) God will look at what we did with the talents and strengths He gave us to use for His glory and praise. He will look at how we spent our resources and how we helped those around us. You may hear God on that day say something like this:

“It was not your time. It was my time entrusted to you. You are My steward. It was not your money. It was not your house. It wasn't your car. Those gifts, they are called gifts. I gave them to you. I entrusted this ministry gift to you. Now, we're going to have a little evaluation time and if you used your time, your talent and your treasure with the right motives, not to impress people, not to gain strokes, not to get people to like you or to think better of you while you secretly had different motives, but to the degree that you used your time, your talent, your treasure, to honor Me during this life. I want you to know that I have some rewards that you will enjoy with Me forever and ever and ever.

If those things don't quite measure up, you will have an experience of loss. We don't hear a lot of teaching on spiritual rewards. It's very clear in scripture. Remember what God's justice is? Everyone gets exactly what they deserve. Do you think that people who have lived for Christ and have a passionate love for Him and been a great steward of their gifts and their time, their talent, their treasure, are going to have the same experience in heaven as those who didn't? Absolutely not. We think heaven is like a socialist society. It absolutely is not. There will be multiple levels of heaven. We all will have no tears, but what you do with your life, what you do with your money, what you do with your gifts and your time will have an eternal impact.

Heaven is not floating on clouds and sipping iced tea and Starbuck or River Road coffee. There's going to be a new heaven and a new earth. It's going to be real people and real life and real work, except everything about this fallen earth is going to be gone. We're going to have relationships and work and joy like we've never known, but what you do and what it looks like will be determined by what you do now. The Bible is very clear on this. So we somehow think that – we're trying to get this little ticket to get into heaven, “I believe in Christ,” as though that's the end of the game, instead of the entrance ticket into a life of service and stewardship.

If you are not a Christian, you have not accepted Christ's offer of salvation and transformation of your life you are going to be in real trouble when God settles up the books. He is our only hope. You may be a good/great person. You may not cheat or lie or steal but without accepting Christ you are going to be lost in eternity.

### **How Are We to Respond to God's Justice?**

I'm going to go through these fairly quickly but this is how we are to respond to God's justice.

- Choose to embrace Jesus today as your Savior rather than meet Him as your righteous judge later. John 5:22-24
- Refuse to take revenge when treated unjustly knowing God and God alone is judge. Romans 12:17-21

"At last I understood: in the final analysis, forgiveness is an act of faith. By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am. By forgiving, I release my own right to get even and leave all issues of fairness for God to work out. I leave in God's hands the scales that must balance justice and mercy. Yancey, "What's So Amazing About Grace?" p.93

- Take comfort when you encounter injustice knowing God will "balance the scales" either in this life or the next. Psalm 73
- Meditate deeply on the reality of the "judgment seat of Christ," the promise of spiritual reward and loss. 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Several years ago, a very peculiar sight could be seen at a large downtown church in England. On the first Sunday of the New Year, an ex-convict knelt to receive communion beside the judge who had sentenced him to seven years in prison. After being sentenced, the young convict was lead to Christ through the church's prison ministry. After his release he became an active member of the church. After church, the judge was walking home with the pastor and said to him, "What a miracle of grace." "You mean the former thief who knelt beside you today?" the pastor asked.

"No. I was thinking of myself," the judge said. "That young man had nothing but a history of crime behind him, and when he saw Jesus as his Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. And he knew how much he needed that help. But look at me. I was taught from earliest infancy to live as a gentleman; that my word was to be my bond; that I was to say my prayers, go to church, take communion and so on. I went to Oxford, earned my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner in need of a Savior."

You know what we all ought to know and own? We ought to own the fact that without Jesus Christ someday justice will be served and it's not going to go well. What side of God's justice are you on? Let's make sure we are on God's side because some day we are going to stand before Him.