

THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

The Justice of God Lesson #6

In the previous lesson we learned about the holiness of God. Closely related to holiness is the attribute of God's justice. Because God is infinitely holy, He cannot look with indifference upon evil. Every sin must be punished because every sin is an infinite offence to an infinite holy God. Once we understand the justice of God, we can better understand why Jesus had to come to earth, be born of a virgin, live a perfect life, die on the cross for our sins, and rise again on the third day. In this lesson we will look at the attribute of God's justice and how it relates to the believer's life today.

I. DEFINITION OF THE JUSTICE OF GOD

A. A. H. Strong in his systematic theology defines justice as,

“God's holiness exercised towards his creatures.”¹

B. *The Moody Handbook of Theology* notes –

“The justice of God is sometimes divided into several categories. The *rectoral justice* of God recognizes God as moral ruler who, in imposing His moral law in the world, promises reward for the obedient and punishment for the disobedient (Ps. 99:4; Rom. 1:32). The *distributive justice* of God relates to the execution of the law in terms of both reward and punishment (Isa. 3:10, 11; Rom. 2:6; 1 Pet. 1:17). Distributive justice is both positive and negative. On the positive side it is termed *remunerative justice* (a reflection of divine love), which dispenses reward to the obedient (Deut. 7:9; Ps. 58:11; Rom. 2:7). On the negative side it is termed *retributive justice*, an expression of divine wrath in which God punishes the wicked (Gen. 2:17; Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10; Rom. 6:23). Since God is just and righteous, the punishment of evildoers is fair because they receive the just penalty due them for their sin.”²

C. Millard Erickson illustrates God's personal and rectorial justice saying,

“God is, in other words, like a judge who as a private individual adheres to the law of society, and in his official capacity administers that same law, applying it to others.”³

¹ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 291.

² Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 196–197.

³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, pg. 288.

- D. Disagreements between the followers of John Calvin and Jacobus Arminius were discussed at the council of Dort. The conclusions to their discussions are written down in the *Cannons of Dort*. A small portion of what they concluded concerned the justice of God,

“God is not only supremely merciful, but also supremely just. And His justice requires (as He has revealed Himself in His Word) that our sins committed against His infinite majesty should be punished, not only with temporal but with eternal punishments, both in body and soul; which we cannot escape, unless satisfaction be made to the justice of God.”⁴

II. THOUGHTS TO PONDER ABOUT THE JUSTICE OF GOD

- A. J. I. Packer asks in his work *Knowing God*,

“Do you believe in divine judgment? By which I mean, do you believe in a God who acts as judge? Many, it seems, do not. Speak to them of God as a Father, a friend, a helper, one who loves us despite all our weakness and folly and sin, and their faces light up; you are on their wavelength at once. But speak to them of God as judge, and they frown and shake their heads. Their minds recoil from such an idea. They find it repellant and unworthy.”⁵

- B. Thomas Watson in his theology *a Body of Divinity* points out,

“If God lets men prosper a while in their sin, his vial of wrath is all this while filling; his sword is all this time [being sharpened]: and though God may forbear men a while, yet long forbearance is no forgiveness. The longer God is in taking to strike a blow, the heavier it will be at last. As long as there is eternity, God has time enough to reckon with his enemies. Justice may be as a lion asleep, but at last, the lion will awake, and roar upon the sinner.”⁶

- C. You often hear people say, “God hates sin, but loves the sinner.” A. H. Strong, rightly points out in his systematic theology, that such a saying does not fit the whole truth. Strong says,

“[God] both hates and loves the sinner himself, hates him as he is a living and willful antagonist of the truth and holiness, loves him as he is a creature capable of good and ruined by his transgression. . .

⁴ *Cannons of Dort*, Article I of the “Second Head of Doctrine – The Death of Christ and the Redemption of Men” taken from, *Historic Creeds and Confessions*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pg. 125.

⁶ Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, pg. 90.

In our civil war Dr. Kirk said: “God knows that we love the rebels, but God also knows that we will kill them if they do not lay down their arms.” The complex nature of God not only permits but necessitates this same double treatment of the sinner, and the earthly father experiences the same conflict of emotions when his heart yearns over the corrupt son whom he is compelled to banish from the household.”⁷

1. Psa. 5:3-6 – “In the morning, O Lord, You will hear my voice; In the morning I will order my prayer to You and eagerly watch. 4 For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness; No evil dwells with You. 5 The boastful shall not stand before Your eyes; You hate all who do iniquity. 6 You destroy those who speak falsehood; The Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit.”
2. Psa. 11:5-7 – “The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, And the one who loves violence His soul hates. 6 Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. 7 For the Lord is righteous, He loves righteousness; The upright will behold His face.”

D. The fact that God is just implies that God is a judge and that He will execute justice through appropriate judgment. Many do not realize that the Savior of sinful men is also their Judge. In this life, before death or the rapture, Jesus is the Savior, extending mercy and grace to all who will repent of their sins and believe in Him for salvation. However, if a person dies unrepentant, or postpones believing until after Jesus returns, then they meet the Savior as Judge. J. I. Packer, commenting on Jesus as Savior and Judge said:

Paul refers to the fact that we must all appear before Christ’s judgment-seat as ‘the terror of the Lord’ (II Cor. 5:11), and well he might. Jesus the Lord, like His Father, is holy and pure; we are neither. We live under his eye, He knows our secrets, and on judgment day the whole of our past life will be played back, as it were, before Him, and brought under review. If we know our selves at all, we know we are not fit to face Him. What then are we to do? The New Testament answer is: call on the coming Judge to be your present Savior. As judge, he is the law, but as Savior, he is the gospel. Run from him now, and you will meet Him as Judge then – and without hope.”⁸

E. Theologian Francis Turretin made this important observation about God’s justice.

“Justice demands necessarily that all sin should be punished, but does not equally demand that it should be punished in the very person sinning.”⁹

⁷ A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907) pg. 290.

⁸ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pg. 133.

⁹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. 1, pg. 236.

III. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF THE JUSTICE OF GOD

- A. Deut. 32:4 -- “The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.”
- B. Job 34:12 – “Surely, God will not act wickedly, And the Almighty will not pervert justice.”
- C. Psa. 37:27-34 -- “Depart from evil and do good, So you will abide forever. 28 For the Lord loves justice And does not forsake His godly ones; They are preserved forever, But the descendants of the wicked will be cut off. 29 The righteous will inherit the land And dwell in it forever. 30 The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, And his tongue speaks justice. 31 The law of his God is in his heart; His steps do not slip. 32 The wicked spies upon the righteous And seeks to kill him. 33 The Lord will not leave him in his hand Or let him be condemned when he is judged. 34 Wait for the Lord and keep His way, And He will exalt you to inherit the land; When the wicked are cut off, you will see it.”
- D. Psa. 89:14 – “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; Lovingkindness and truth go before You.”
- E. Isa. 9:6-7 -- “For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. 7 There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this.”
- F. Zeph. 3:5 –5 The Lord is righteous within her; He will do no injustice. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He does not fail. But the unjust knows no shame.”
- G. Jn. 3:16-19, 36 – “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 “For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. . . 36 “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”
- H. Acts 17:30-31 -- “Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, 31 because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

- I. II Pet. 3:3-9 – “Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, 4 and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” 5 For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God the heavens existed long ago and the earth was formed out of water and by water, 6 through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. 7 But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. 8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

- J. Rev. 20:11-15 -- Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

IV. **ERRORS ABOUT THE JUSTICE OF GOD**

- A. Error – God can’t be just because there is so much evil in the world. If God were just He would do something about evil.

- B. Error – God can’t be just because He doesn’t save all men. God has the power to save whoever He wills, but only saves some. Therefore, God can’t be just because He isn’t fair in His treatment of sinners.

- C. Error – Because God is just He treats everyone the same way. His justice is egalitarian.

- D. Error – In the Old Testament God is a god of justice and wrath, but in the New Testament He is a god of grace.

- E. Error – Because everything has continued the same since creation God can’t be just because He looks with indifference upon sin.

- F. Error – God cannot be both loving and just, for justice demands that the sinner is punished, and God loves and takes no pleasure in the death of sinners.

- G. Error – God isn’t just when He doesn’t do what I think He should do.

V. APPLICATION OF GOD'S JUSTICE

- A. When we see all the evil and injustice in the world, we can be comforted knowing that God sees it all, remembers it all, and that every sin will be dealt with according to God's perfect holy justice.
- B. Though God is absolutely just, He allows for vicarious, penal, substitution.
1. *Vicarious* means delegated, endured for someone else, or taking the place of another. A vicar is a *person who is able to perform the duties of another*, in the church of England, for instance, a vicar is the man who fills in for the Bishop when the Bishop is absent.
 2. The term *penal* refers to legal punishment. We have a "penal system." Those convicted of a crime in a court of law must pay some penalty for their crime.
 3. *Substitution* refers to the act of taking the place of another. When you combine "vicarious, penal, substitute" you are speaking of a person that is willing to take the place of another and suffer the legal punishment they deserve.
 - a. Isa. 53:4-6, 10 – "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him. . . 10 But the Lord was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, And the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand."
 - b. Heb. 9:27-28 – "And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, 28 so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him."
 - c. I Pet. 3:18 – "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit."
- C. Because God is just, he expects us to be just like He is just.
1. Jer. 22:3 – "Thus says the Lord, "Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of his oppressor. Also do not mistreat or do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place."

2. Mic. 6:6-8 – “With what shall I come to the Lord And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? 7 Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God?”

“Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith” (Romans 1:17). Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.”
~Martin Luther¹⁰

¹⁰ Martin Luther's account of his conversion in Mark Water's, *The Christian Book of Records*, (Alresford, Hants, UK: John Hunt Pub., 2002), 82.