

## God's Justice

Deuteronomy 31:30–32:4, 43; Romans 3:21–26

This is the ninth in a series of sermons on Shorter Catechism Q&A 4, “What is God? God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.” Today we come to God’s *justice*.

This is such a vast theme in the Bible that the challenge is which biblical statements to choose for one sermon.

I have taken for our biblical text the words of Moses’s song that he taught the people toward the very end of his life. Moses has had a very close relationship with the Lord. Two times he has gone up on Mount Sinai to spend forty days in seclusion with God. The first time was in Exodus 34. We read that “Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. The sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.”

The second time was in Exodus 34—ten chapters later, after the golden calf incident. We read that again Moses “was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water.”

Twice, then, this man Moses spent forty days on Mount Sinai in seclusion with God. He was there at God’s appointment. This was a unique occurrence experienced by no other person—ever. What a unique privilege Moses had! His own sister and brother were jealous.

In Numbers 12 there is the account of his brother and sister Miriam and Aaron speaking against him. They said, “Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us also?” Suddenly the LORD said, “Come out, you three, to the tabernacle of meeting!” . . . Then the LORD came down in the pillar of cloud and stood in the door of the tabernacle, and called Aaron and Miriam. . . . He said, “Hear now My words: if there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make Myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is faithful in all My house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?” Where the NKJV has “I speak with him face to face,” the original KJV is more literal: “I speak with him *mouth to mouth*.” These words imply a high degree of intimacy. The language of God, who is pure spirit, as having a mouth, is figurative. But Moses’s experience is unique; no one else in the Bible had this kind of fellowship with the God who *is*.

So here was a chosen prophet who at the Lord's invitation spent *two* forty-day periods up on Mount Sinai in seclusion, fellowshiping with the living God. The LORD spoke with him mouth to mouth. Here is the man Moses, who under divine inspiration is qualified to speak authoritatively concerning the character of God. What does he say in our text this morning? He says: "I proclaim the name of the LORD." He invites God's people to join him in ascribing greatness to this great God, to confess the name of the LORD as a public confession of faith: "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He."<sup>1</sup> This the church gladly confesses. As the writer to the Hebrews exhorts, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering." We who are born again gladly join our voices in confessing "Yahweh our God is great. He is the Rock, his work is perfect. All his ways are justice. He is a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is he." No born-again child of God would hesitate to confess these truths with the saints.

Let me read the last part of verse 4 in the KJV, which is more literal: ". . . all his ways are *judgment*: a God of truth and without iniquity, *just* and *right* is he." Let's consider these words in turn:

### 1. God is just.

The word for "just" is צַדִּיק. This word is used 206 times in the Hebrew Bible. In the KJV it is usually translated "just" or "righteous." "Noah was a *just* man." "He that ruleth over men must be *just*, ruling in the fear of God." "There is no God else beside me; a *just* God and a Savior; there is none beside me." "By his knowledge shall my *righteous* servant *justify* many; for he shall bear their iniquities."

*Just* is defined as "acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good: righteous." God himself is just; there is no defect in his holy character. What is morally upright or good is defined by God's law, not man's. God's holy law is the description of the holy character of God himself. But mankind has a problem: we do not measure up to God's holiness and justice. The Psalmist pointed this out in Psalm 143:2: "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for *in Your sight no one living is righteous* (פִּי לֹא־יִצְדֵק לְפָנֶיךָ כָּל־חַי) (Ps. 143:2). The word translated "is righteous" is the verbal form of צַדִּיק, *just*.

Let the full force of these words strike you, dear hearer: in the sight of a holy God, *no one living is just, no one living is righteous!* That includes you, me and every man, woman and child. We are *not* righteous, we do not measure up to God's holy standard of perfect justice. As the New Testament confirms: "*All* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." This is our predicament. Since God is a just God, he cannot in any way let sinful man enter his holy presence; we cannot get to heaven by our own efforts. But the good news of the Gospel is that the God of

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. אֵל אֱמוּנָה וְאִינוּ עוֹל, צַדִּיק וְיֵשֶׁר הוּא

heaven has done something about that! It was prophesied in Jeremiah 23:5–6, “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a *righteous* Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and *justice* in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD *OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS*.”

The Lord Jesus Christ is the second person of the Holy Trinity, the holy and righteous God come in the flesh. Jesus Christ is the righteous branch prophesied in the book of Jeremiah. Since he is the God-man, having inherited his humanity through his mother Mary, and being not the biological child of Joseph but the Son of the living God, Jesus is the only person in all of human history who did not inherit a sin nature through a human father. When the Bible says, “*All* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God,” there is one and only one exception: Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, the sinless One who loved us, lived a perfect life and went to the cross to die for his people—the one who is himself “the LORD our righteousness.” All of us, undeserving as we are, who look to him in true faith, are justified—declared righteous in the sight of a holy God, clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ. Though in this life we still struggle with indwelling sin, we know that when Christ appears at the end of time in glorious splendor, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Our struggle with sin will be finished, our sanctification will be complete, and we shall go with him to enter heaven.

Do you acknowledge that you are a sinner with no hope of eternal life apart from Christ? Do you confess the Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Do you look to him alone for salvation? God’s word declares, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Rom. 10:9–11).

The only way that you can do this is by the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, giving you a knowledge of your sin and danger, and revealing the glory of the perfect Savior, Jesus Christ. God graciously convinces his elect of their sin and misery, enlightens our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renews our wills, persuading and enabling us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel. This he does by the secret operation of his Holy Spirit. As Christians we long to see our friends and neighbors confess Christ. So we pray for them, that God’s gracious Spirit would open their hearts to see their extreme danger apart from Christ, and would draw them effectually to the Savior, that they might become his willing worshipers. We have considered the fact that the eternal God is *just*—in the words of our Shorter Catechism, “God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his . . . justice.”

## 2. God is right.

The second word in Moses' song is "right": just and *right* is he." The word for "right" (יָשָׁר) is literally *straight*. This word occurs 119 times. According to the lexicographer James Strong, the KJV translates as "right" 53 times, "upright" 42 times, "righteous" nine times, and "straight" only three times. But the literal meaning is *straight*, such as a straight path.<sup>2</sup> In English the word *straight* means "extending in one direction only, free from curves, bends, angles, or irregularities." The God of heaven is not crooked but straight; there are no angles or irregularities with him.

We make this point because sinful man likes to compare himself with other men, to make himself look better. *Equity*, *equality* and *iniquity* come from *equal*. In the minds of many, justice must be equal; equal numbers of the various races must be arrested or found guilty. If there are inequities in the arrest rates between people of various colors and cultures, then people conclude that justice has not been done. It is a modern maxim that justice must be *fair* and *impartial*, that there must be equal outcomes for everybody.

Based on the proliferation of modern Bible translations many Christians have been taught to believe that there is no impartiality with God.<sup>3</sup> Now his law is universal; it applies to everybody, but the God of heaven is free; he answers to no man. He is free to choose Jacob and reject Esau—both sinners equally undeserving of grace. In eternity past, before he created any person, when the human race existed only in the mind of God, God the Father, out of all humanity, chose a people for himself to give to his Son, whom the Son would come to the earth to save. Those that were chosen are called God's elect, those who were passed over are called the reprobate. Let there be no mistake: *all* would fall in Adam, *all* would be equally undeserving. No human—even the Virgin Mary—would deserve to be saved. The glory of salvation is that God does not save the deserving but the *undeserving*! So in a sense God is partial. In eternity past he enters into covenant with his people and loves them with an everlasting love. But God is free; he makes free choices and answers to no man.

Consider Deuteronomy 16:19. In a comparison of translations of this verse on BibleHub.com, six modern translations have "you shall not show partiality," one has "you shall not be partial," one has "you shall not show favoritism." The NKJV has "You shall not pervert justice; you shall not *show partiality*, nor take a bribe." But the note for "show partiality" in the NKJV says, "Lit. *regard faces*." The old KJV is more literal: "thou shalt not respect persons." The French Bible has "you shall not regard the appearance of persons." God does not skew judgment based on

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Jer. 31:9

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Deut. 10:17 (NKJV): "For the LORD your God . . . shows no partiality . . ."; KJV: "regardeth not persons" (Heb. לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנִים *doesn't lift up faces*)

whether an individual has a pleasing face (after all, God made our faces). In Romans 2:11 the NKJV has “God shows no partiality,” but the Greek has literally “there is no taking of faces.” The old KJV is close to the original: “there is no respect of persons with God.” There is no respect of persons with God, but only perfect justice! If you commit sin, God knows, and judges it as sin. The God of heaven is not crooked but straight.

What do we call a lawbreaker? A crook! What is a crook? A person who is crooked, who engages in fraudulent or criminal practices. The eighth commandment says, “Thou shalt not steal,” but evildoers steal from vulnerable people without even feeling a sense of guilt. A recent newspaper report described crooks who tried to steal refund cash by using identity theft to file fake tax returns. Experience tells us we ought to take precautions to protect our property from crooks. It is probably better not to leave rolls of cash lying out in the open, but to keep them in out of sight in a locked drawer. It is better to take the car keys with us when we park it, so as not to make it an inviting target for car thieves.

It is extremely important to note that the God of heaven is straight. He says, “You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the LORD your God . . .” (Lev. 19:35–36 ESV). God does not have different sets of balances for different people. His standard is the same for every man, woman and child on the face of the earth—absolute perfection! He doesn’t demand perfection from some, then turn a blind eye and let crooked cronies in when nobody’s looking. He is not a shady businessman or a politician who can be bought off with favors. He is straight, and he is a straight-shooter when he speaks in his Word. Whatever he says about anything is right and just and true. He does not bend his righteous commandments for any person.

Because he is straight, he can be trusted. He doesn’t tell little white lies to make you feel better; he tells the truth. The man or woman taught by the Holy Spirit learns to say with the Psalmist, “Therefore I esteem all thy precepts concerning all things to be *right* (the verbal form of יָשָׁר); and I hate every false way” (Ps. 119:128). Yes, whatever God teaches in his word is true and right; there is no need ever to apologize for it.

God is righteous. Since God is triune, each Person of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is righteous. The Christian is promised: “If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the *righteous* (Ἰησοῦν χριστὸν δίκαιον)” (1 John 2:1). Since we, by nature, are sinners lacking original righteousness, the Father has provided a perfect Savior, Jesus Christ the righteous. There is no other one like him; there is no other Savior.

No fallen son or daughter of Adam is righteous by nature, but those who turn to Christ by faith have their sins washed away; all their guilt is laid on Christ, and his

perfect righteousness, is credited to their account as a free gift. God does this because he is merciful and gracious. “Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage? he retaineth not his anger for ever, because he delighteth in mercy” (Micah 7:18). Christian, your God doesn’t have to be bribed or coaxed or cajoled to show mercy; he *delights* to show mercy! Whoever comes to him with childlike faith will be saved.

### 3. Our New Testament text

Consider again our New Testament text, Romans 3:24ff. “But now the *righteousness* of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the *righteousness* of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His *righteousness*, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His *righteousness*, that He might be *just* and the *justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Four times in this text Paul refers to God’s righteousness (δικαιοσύνη): the righteousness of God. Righteousness comes from the word *righteous*; it means *acting in accord with divine law*. God’s law, not human opinion, is the standard. If God’s law judges a particular action to be right, it is right; if it judges a particular action to be sin, it is sin. Honoring your father and mother is right; it cannot be anything other than right. Contrariwise, committing adultery is sin; it cannot be anything other than sin. God’s law is the standard.

God’s law reveals that we have sinned—fallen short of the righteousness and justice of God. The only hope for sinners is the gospel: “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures . . . he was buried, and . . . he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.” The gospel teaches us that the person who puts his trust in Jesus shall be saved. God has found a way to save a person without compromising his justice. The person who looks to Jesus in true faith is justified: declared righteous; and God is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” He doesn’t sacrifice his justice to save unworthy sinners.

The idea of the God of heaven being perfectly just and righteous and requiring this of his people has had a far-reaching impact upon Western culture, though this priceless moral capital is fast being used up. It is not so in countries that were not founded on biblical principles. A *World Magazine* article describing evangelism efforts among India’s lowest caste, the untouchables, pointed out that officially, Article 15 of India’s Constitution forbids discrimination against any citizen on the basis of race, sex, religion, or *caste*—language that sounds familiar to Western

ears. But this language is ignored in practice. An Indian social reformer explained that though India may have a law and a constitution inspired by the Bible, “we do not have that ethos of *justice* and *righteousness*.” *World* observed that “No god in the Hindu pantheon has granted any of the ‘unalienable rights’ Thomas Jefferson took for granted.”<sup>4</sup>

But as Isaiah says in Isaiah 30:18, “the LORD is a God of justice (כִּי־אֱלֹהֵי מִשְׁפָּט (יהוה); blessed are all those who wait for Him.” God is just, but if you look in faith to Jesus Christ the righteous, he will save you and make you his child. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Bethel McGrew, “Loving the despised: India’s ‘untouchables’ find hope—and a new identity—in Christ” <https://wng.org/articles/loving-the-despised-1691465699> accessed 9-28-23