God's Justice: 
Love Tells the Truth

Let’s say you had a deadly illness of some sort, but didn’t know it. You didn’t feel well. You were tired all the time and so finally, after some time, you go to your doctor. He orders some tests to try and determine what’s wrong with you. After some weeks you go back for a follow-up appointment and you expect the doctor to tell you the problem. You expect him to tell you the truth. Sometimes there are people who don’t want the doctor to tell the truth; they’d rather be in the dark and they deceive themselves into thinking everything is okay when it isn’t. But if the doctor is a good doctor who takes his oath seriously, he’ll tell the truth. In fact, we could say that it would be the most loving thing for a doctor to do.

Think of Proverbs 27:6. The NIV reads “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.” Older translations read something like: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful.” Friends speak the truth in love, even when it hurts in the short-term. Friends care and so will tell you what you need to hear. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend.” This is all the more true when we speak about God’s justice. Today we want to consider what the Bible says about this. When we speak with unbelievers or when we speak with one another, we have to be clear that God is just and that he administers justice. To be open about that truth is loving because it exposes a serious problem and ultimately drives us to a comforting solution.

God’s justice is controversial today. In Grand Rapids, Michigan, there is a mega-church called Mars Hill Bible Church. The pastor’s name is Rob Bell. He recently wrote a book entitled Love Wins. Bell argues that everyone goes to heaven because of Jesus. There is no place called hell where people experience eternal conscious torment, where they receive the just wrath of God. Everyone goes to heaven. Now for those who don’t believe, heaven is like hell. But eventually, there in heaven, God’s love wins them over and everyone lives happily ever after.

**What does it mean that God is just?**

However, the truth is God *is* just. The Bible teaches that in places like Psalm 11. Psalm 11:7 tells us that the LORD (Yahweh) is righteous. It’s also in Deuteronomy 32:4, in the song of Moses. Moses says,

“He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”

But what does it mean that God is just? It means that God is always right in his judgments and assessments of what he sees. He always gives what is exactly deserved and displays no favouritism. He always acquits the righteous and always condemns those who are guilty. All of this comes out of God’s own righteous character. He is just and therefore he does justice.

When we speak about God’s justice, we have to realize that this is something different from what we see in the world around us. Here in Canada, we have something called a criminal justice system. When crimes are committed, the crowds want justice. So, the federal government has a justice minister who takes care of that. But if you look closer, you’ll see that Canada’s criminal justice system is not really about justice, at least not in the biblical sense of the word. What’s the name of the federal agency that oversees our nation’s prisons? The Correctional Service of Canada. Criminal justice in Canada is about rehabilitation and restoration – it’s obviously based on a very positive view of human nature.
Scripture is counter-cultural on this score. In the Bible, God’s justice is not about rehabilitating and restoring the sinner, but about punishing him with a just judgment both now and eternally. In the Bible, God’s justice is about punishing sins committed against the most high majesty of God with the most severe punishment, one that lasts forever and involves both body and soul. Justice is about receiving exactly what you deserve.

**The testimony of Psalm 7**

God’s justice is clearly brought into focus in Psalm 7, especially in verses 11-13. Let’s take a closer look at those verses. Verse 10 says that God is a shield. Most people are good with that because shields are passive. A shield just sits there and absorbs all the force of whatever gets thrown at it. Many people have more of a problem with a God who is a warrior, a God who is active and who fights back at the wicked. That’s one of the images that this Psalm uses to describe God. We’ll look at that a bit more in a moment. But verse 11 begins with another image of God: God as a judge.

This psalm tells us that “God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day.” When we read this verse, we need to keep in mind a basic feature of Hebrew poetry called parallelism. Many times in Hebrew poetry, when you have two lines they parallel each other and often times the second line is simply expressing the thought of the first line in a slightly different way. Sometimes the second line is building on the first line. That’s what’s happening in Psalm 7:11. God’s expressing his wrath is parallel to his being a righteous judge. Righteous judges can be expected to do exactly this sort of thing. This is even more obvious when we dig a little deeper into the words used in the second part of verse 11. The verb for “expressing wrath” has the sense of a legal judgment, actually a legal curse. There is a strong level of intensity here, but we’re still in the courtroom before the judge.

“He expresses his wrath every day.” What this means is that God is not a part-time judge. In some remote parts of Canada you’ll still find circuit judges. Especially in the Arctic, there are remote villages where a judge and his legal entourage fly in and show up once per month. God is not like that sort of judge. God is always behind the bench and he is always dispensing his judgments. God doesn’t take coffee breaks and he doesn’t take holidays. God regularly deals out justice to the wicked; he gives them exactly what’s coming to them.

If the wicked do not repent, then the judge removes his robe and reveals his battle fatigues. He goes after them as a warrior. That’s what we find in verses 12 and 13 of Psalm 7. The man who doesn’t repent should know that God will be sharpening his sword – the sword is a well-known symbol of divine judgment and justice in the Bible. The sword was used for close combat. In close combat, you see the whites of the eyes of your enemy and you feel the intensity and adrenaline. God may come after his enemies in that fashion. But he can also use a different approach. David also portrays God as an archer bending his bow, stringing it, and getting it ready to send flaming arrows through the air. The bow and arrow was a terrifying weapon of war because arrows were silent, sudden and swift. You might not even see them coming. The fact that the arrows in this Psalm are flaming intensifies the fear one should feel in contemplating this. You do not want to mess with this Divine Warrior. Judgment might come sooner or it might come later, but it will come.

**He isn’t Santa Claus**

So Psalm 7 gives us a powerful picture of a just God who will mete out just desserts. This is not the picture of God most people want to hear about. For many people today, even many who claim to be Christians, they would rather have a God who looks more like Santa Claus. No one thinks of Santa as a just judge. He knows what you’ve been up to, but he still gives presents to just about everybody. You have to be really bad before Santa doesn’t show up. Even then Santa just forgets about you and leaves you to your own devices, he doesn’t actually come after you with a sword and flaming arrows. The way people think about Santa is almost exactly the way that most people in our context think about God. But it is not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches us the fear of God. God is not someone to be trifled with, but to be revered. Hebrews 10:31 says that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” It is a fearful
thing to be given over to God’s justice. Moreover, in Hebrews 12, after encouraging us to serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear, the author of Hebrews tells us why: because our God is a consuming fire. The Word of God cultivates in us the fear of God – a reverent sense that God is awesome, majestic, powerful and extremely dangerous to his enemies.

The Scriptures portray to us a God who is just, who apart from Christ always gives his enemies what they deserve. God’s justice must be taken seriously. Let’s now briefly reflect together on three aspects of God’s justice, that it is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

**Infinite, eternal, and unchangeable justice**

First, God’s justice is *infinite*. In other words, it knows no bounds. In the Canadian justice system, the police are limited in the number of infractions of the law they can detect and they’re limited in the number of offenders they can arrest. The police can’t be everywhere at once and even if they could, they wouldn’t see everything. In God’s justice, no one gets away – God is the one about whom it can truly be said: “He always gets his man.” In the Canadian justice system, the crown is limited in the number of charges it can press and prosecute. They have limited resources at their disposal. In God’s justice, everyone who is guilty gets charged and gets brought before the judge. In the Canadian justice system, the courts are limited in the number of cases they can hear per day. God has no such limits. In the Canadian justice system, the prisons are limited in the number of prisoners they can hold. The hell where God’s just wrath is expressed has no such limits. God’s wrath, the expression of his justice, knows no bounds.

Second, God’s justice is *eternal*. That means that God has always been just and always will be. He has administered justice in the past and he will always administer justice into the future. At the very end of Isaiah, the prophet passes on the declaration of Yahweh regarding the wicked and their future. They will go to a place where their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched. This is a picture of hell, the place where God’s wrath has been administered in times past and will be into an eternal future. Sometimes people speak about hell as a place where God is not present. They say hell is the absence of God. But that’s not what the Bible says. As far as I’m aware there’s no place in the Bible that teaches that hell is the absence of God. Please think about it for a minute: whose wrath is expressed in hell? Isn’t hell the place of God’s wrath? God is there in his wrath to administer justice eternally. Even on the cross, when our Lord Jesus cried out that he had been forsaken by God, that did not mean that God had disappeared. Rather, God had poured out his fierce wrath against sin and sinners upon Jesus. As 2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it, Christ became sin for us on the cross. As he did so, God attacked him. That was the nature of the forsakenness that he experienced – the full measure of hell.

Finally, God’s justice is also *unchangeable*. It is immutable. Nothing and no one can change God’s character in any way, let alone his justice. Balaam said it in Numbers 23:19,

> “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?”

In relation to his justice, God has always hated sin and punished it and he always will. He will never swerve from his justice.

**God’s justice satisfied!**

God’s justice is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. God will not allow human disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished. Something must be done with sin and sinners. We have our original sin, the guilt and corruption passed on from Adam, but we also have our actual sins – sins in thought, word, and deed. We sin against God and against our neighbour. We sin in what we do and in what we leave undone. According to James, if we break even one commandment, we’ve broken the whole lot. According to Galatians 3:10, if we do not abide by all things written in the law, we’re under a curse. In God’s courtroom, we’re as guilty as sin. What we deserve is everlasting punishment of body and soul. There’s no way out ... unless somehow God makes a way.
Unless somehow God makes a way for his justice to be satisfied. If his justice can be satisfied, then there is a way for us to leave the courtroom with relief and joy. There is a way and it is found with God’s mercy. We hear of that mercy in passages like Ezekiel 18:23,

“Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”

But God’s mercy will never be shown at the expense of his justice. There can be no contradiction in God and so his attributes can never be played off against one another. He must be just – infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably so.

How is it that God can be just and we can be saved? The answer has everything to do with Jesus Christ doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. It has to do with the gospel, the good news of Christ’s redemption. At the cross, God laid our sins on Christ and violently attacked him for it. That was a display of justice. We can therefore say that we are redeemed by God’s justice. But there’s more. Because that same display of justice towards Christ was also a display of mercy towards us. God poured out his mercy, he showed goodness and kindness to the undeserving at Golgotha. Through Christ’s sacrifice, the wrath of God has been turned away from us and his Fatherly favour has been inclined towards us.

We call it good news. Yet we can easily forget why it is so good. It’s good precisely because without it, we would have to face God’s infinite, eternal, and unchangeable justice alone. Without the gospel, we would spend an eternity learning that that justice cannot be satisfied by mere human beings. The gospel is the good news that because of Christ we will not have to go to the school of hell and damnation. The gospel frees us from the fear of condemnation.

**Love tells the truth**

Love tells the truth about all this. It is not loving to skate around God’s justice and pretend that it doesn’t exist or that it’s something different than what the Bible says. Think about this question for a minute: who was the one person who spoke the most about hell in the Bible? It was the Lord Jesus Christ. Why did he speak so much about the wrath to come? Wasn’t it because he was compelled by love to tell the truth? Exactly because of that. He said in John 15:15,

“...I have called you friends, for everything that I have learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

Love tells the truth, including the truth about God’s justice. Our Lord Jesus did it and those who are united to him by faith and the Holy Spirit will go and do likewise. True biblical love sees a neighbour under the threat of God’s justice and speaks up and warns that neighbour and offers the only way out in Jesus Christ. It’s a cruel love that seals its lips.

One last point: love is compelled to tell the truth about God’s justice in a loving way. Scripture instructs us to speak the truth in love. Not only speak the truth out of love, but in a loving way. So if you’re going to speak about God’s justice frankly and openly with anyone, you’ll want to do so in a way that reflects your Saviour. This is where prayer again is so crucial. Pray that God would truly break your heart for those who are still under the spectre of his justice. Pray that God would give you the gift of tears for those who are still wandering in darkness. Pray that God would give you a true love for those on the broad road which leads to destruction – and not that we would love them as potential converts, but to love them as people no matter what happens to them spiritually. God will use those prayers to mould our hearts and help us to speak in loving ways – and that will be used to advance the gospel for his glory. That’s what we’re here for.

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