

Justice And Grace

Understanding Holiness, Justice, Sin and Grace

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Last week we looked at some examples of divine justice that at the very least have puzzled some of us. Maybe it is not so puzzling now, but it has been puzzling in the past. Others of us may have been really disturbed or maybe angered because our sense of fairness was disrupted by what God did do. I made the statement that the reason we have difficulty with this is because we do not understand holiness, justice, sin, and grace.

It is important that we understand the relationship between all of these because they all interact. This sermon is not going to be about the relationship between all four, but we are going to be touching on some of that today.

To us the concept of justice has a notion of fairness directly involved in it. It is almost as if fairness and justice are one and the same thing. At first glance it does not seem as though fairness was ever even considered by God in His dealings with Nadab and Abihu, Ananias and Sapphira, and Uzza, and we might say several others as well.

Justice is defined by Webster as "the maintenance or administration of what is just." In actual practice it is seen as the restoration of equality. That is where we get our sense of fairness in being connected with justice. The word "just" is defined as "reasonable; conforming to a standard of correctness; acting on conformity with what is morally upright or good."

The synonyms for the word "just" are "fair" and "upright." This is very close to the Bible's usage. You will recall that I defined "justice" last week as "conformity to a rule or standard." That is the Bible's definition of justice. However, the Bible's norm or standard is God's own holy character, not a set of laws or a set of statutes we might have in our mind, because we relate to the governments of men. Biblically, justice is measured against God's holy character. God's holy character is reflected verbally in His law, or you might say more broadly, in His Word.

We are going to look at one of those scriptures where Abraham asked a question of God.

Genesis 18:23-25 And Abraham came near and said, Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there were fifty righteous

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within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

I used this verse as a basis for explaining that God's justice is according to His righteousness, His holy character. Psalm 119:172 defines righteousness. "All Your commandments are righteousness." Those commandments reflect in writing the character of God.

What God does is always consistent with who and what He is, and what He has written. His righteousness is absolute purity. He is utterly incapable of an unholy, unrighteous, unjust act. It is totally beyond Him to do any such thing. For God to act unfairly, He would simply have to cease being God. It is totally impossible for Him to do something that would be injustice.

When Abraham uses the word "righteous" in "Would You destroy the righteous with the wicked?" he is not saying, "Would You destroy the sinless with the wicked?" He is not saying that these people are sinless. He means people, who through the fear of God and being conscientious about that have kept themselves free from the iniquity of the cities. The cities here are Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham's concern was that there were people in the city we might consider to be really good citizens. They were not sinless, but if there was a fear of God in them, maybe they were trying with all their might to obey God, but they were caught up simply in being in the environment which God had decided He was going to destroy.

As an interesting aside, I want you also to note here that Abraham never once mentioned Lot. That may be implied, because we all know that Lot was in the city. But as far as we know, there was only Lot, his wife, and two daughters. That amounts to four people. Abraham, in his pleadings, only went down as far as ten. Now if he really had Lot in mind, why did he not go all the way down to four? This shows something about Abraham and his understanding of God. Abraham knew God well enough that he could rely on God, that even if there were ten righteous people there, God's judgment would be absolutely fair. Even if there was one, there was the possibility that God would intervene for this person's sake.

Now God does not always act with justice. Sometimes He acts with mercy. That is what He did with Lot and his family. God acted with justice with the city because it was so corrupt, so evil, so filled with sin that it even offended God's sense of what is right and

wrong. It even offended God's patience, His longsuffering. And so in justice He wiped the city off the map, but in grace and mercy He spared Lot, his wife, and two children.

Now mercy is not justice, but neither is it injustice, because injustice would violate righteousness, and God always acts according to His holy character, which is total righteousness. So therefore mercy, which manifests kindness and grace, does no violence to righteousness, and we may see non-justice in God - which is mercy - but we never see injustice in God.

Is God fair in His dealings with man? Consider this: Has God warned man what he is going to earn in the way of a death penalty if he sinned? Listen to this list. In Exodus 21, we are warned that striking or cursing parents will result in death. In Leviticus 19, He says that if you desecrate a sacrifice, you are going to die. In Leviticus 24, He said that if you murder somebody, you are going to die. In Exodus 21, He says that if you kidnap somebody, you are going to die. In Leviticus 20, He says if you sacrifice a child in the fire, you are going to die. In Leviticus 24, He says If you take My name in vain - if you curse Me, if your use blasphemous statements about Me - you are going to die.

In Exodus 35, He issued the death penalty for breaking the Sabbath. In Leviticus 20, He issues the death penalty for consulting mediums. In Leviticus 20, He says that if you are practicing homosexuality, you are going to die. In Leviticus 20, if you practice incest, you are going to die. In Exodus 22, if you practice bestiality, you are going to die. In Deuteronomy 22, He says that if you rape somebody, you are going to die. In Deuteronomy 13, if you give a false prophecy, you are going to die.

In Exodus 22, if you practice sorcery, you are going to die. In Exodus 22, if you sacrifice to a false god, you are going to die. In Leviticus, if you commit adultery you are going to die. In Numbers 4, if you desecrate a holy thing you are going to die. In Numbers 16, if you disagree with God's judgment, you are going to die. In Leviticus 21, if you are a priest's daughter and you play the harlot, you are going to die.

I have only given you a partial list. God has clearly made it available to mankind what the penalty is. Is God acting fairly? The penalty for some of these offenses really sounds harsh to modern minds. Death for a false prophecy? Death for committing adultery? Death for bestiality or homosexuality? All of these penalties are given in the Old Testament. By contrast, there is no corresponding list of such things in the New Testament, and that misleads some who are really pretty close to being biblically illiterate into thinking that they prefer the God of the New Testament to the God of the Old Testament. But the God of the New Testament is exactly the same Being as the God of the Old Testament, and He says "I change not." "Jesus Christ, the same

yesterday, today, and forever."

I think those of us who are living under the New Covenant need to begin to think seriously about the way we are conducting our lives. We need to think seriously about this in reference to our own relationship with God. We cannot deny that the New Testament list of capital offenses would appear to be a dramatic reduction from the Old. What we fail to consider is that the Old Testament I just gave you is a massive reduction from what appears at the beginning of the Book. The list I read from mainly out of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers represents an astonishing measure of grace from what things began with.

We are going to look at the instructions given to Adam and Eve in Genesis 2.

Genesis 2:17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat; for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Ezekiel 18:4 Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; The soul that sins shall die.

Brethren, when we read that in Genesis 2:17, do we not subconsciously read into it, "Yes, but He does not really mean that. He means we will *eventually* die." We soften it, expecting that God will not carry through with what He literally says. I am going to give you a couple of quotes from some commentaries. The *Keil-Delitzsch Commentary* says, "That in the day that you eat thereof you shall die." It means as soon as he ate, he would die. The *Keil-Delitzsch* is a very conservative commentary.

Let me give you one from *The Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, which is one of the most liberal commentaries. They say, "Death would follow immediately!" From one of the most conservative commentaries to one of the most liberal, they agree the verse says that when they touched that tree, thus showing the intent of their heart, they would die. That is pretty strong.

Brethren, in the beginning, at creation, all sin is deemed as worthy of death. Every sin is a capital offense. Let us think about this a little further. In creation God was not obligated in any way to give you and me life. He is not indebted to us at all. Life is a gift that puts us under obligation, and that obligation is stated, or at least implied very strongly right when man is being created. "Let us create man in Our image." God gave life to man and put him under the obligation of being the image-bearer of God. That is

why you and I were created. Think about that.

In chapter 2 we are further obligated by God's command to take of the Tree of Life, and not the other tree. The implication there is that only God knows how we are to live in order to fill our obligation to be the image-bearer of God. We have to learn that the root of sin lies in the desire of men to live their lives in self-centered independence from God. This is where the root of trouble is. This is what keeps us from being the image-bearers of God that God intended we be. If we deviate from this, have we not broken our obligation to God? If we deviate from this - if we go from the path, if we miss the mark - we have sinned. We have broken our obligation to mirror and reflect the holiness of God.

There is another thing here right in this context. It is implied by the name *Tree of Life*. God is telling us that we do not intrinsically possess the kind of life that God has, and that if we want that kind of life, it must be added. It is added through what the Tree of Life symbolized. What if we do not meet our obligations? Well, when we sin, we forfeit the gift of life. Once we sin, we forfeit any claim to human existence.

Is God unfair if something is so clearly stated? Are you beginning to see why He commands us to choose life? He sets before us two different ways. He commands us to go in a certain direction, because if we go in the other direction we have broken our obligation to be image-bearers, and then He is not obligated any longer after that to continue our lives. He is under no obligation to continue the life that He gave to you and me as a gift. God is not acting unfairly at all. There is no injustice. The commands are very clear.

When the penalty was stated to Adam and Eve, did God say, "If you sin, some day you will die?" No. He did not say that. The penalty is stated very clearly to be instant death, just as suddenly as it fell on Nadab and Abihu, and on Ananias and Sapphira, and Uzza.

Let us look at this realistically and let us not try to soften what God very clearly literally says. He meant the death penalty in the fullest sense of the word. The only reason they lived was because it was right at that point God extended grace. That is the only reason Adam and Eve continued to live. God was no longer obligated to continue their life.

They had broken His Word. They had deviated from the path, and the just thing for God to have done would have been to have killed them just as instantly as He did Uzza. That is not what He did though. Instead He gave them mercy. He gave them grace. There is a saying that "Justice delayed is justice denied," but not always so. In this case with Adam and Eve, the full measure of justice was delayed in order for grace to have time to

work.

I hope you are thinking of this in relation to you, because He is establishing a pattern here. Justice was delayed in order for grace to have time to work. In this case the delay of justice was not the denial of justice, but the establishing of mercy and grace, and so right at the very beginning of the Book, in the third chapter, grace is already introduced.

Hebrews 2:14-15 Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage [the bondage to death].

That word "release" means the same as somebody seeking a divorce; to break from something, to break an agreement.

The death penalty was still imposed on Adam and Eve, and all men have died because all have come under the death penalty for sin. "The wages of sin is death." "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," and therefore die. In this sense then, we all are sitting on death row. We instinctively or intuitively know this. That is why we fear death. Even though men do not know God, they intuitively understand that they are going to die. There is the record of history, and they also have that feeling, that sense of their mortality within them.

Again I ask, "Is it unjust for a holy God to impose the death penalty for sin?" We have broken our obligations. If you say it is unjust for God to impose the death penalty for sin, then since His justice is based in His holy character, then that is a slander against His holy character to say, "Yes. God is unjust." You see, His justice is always in harmony with His righteousness, and I would have to conclude then that if we say "yes" to that question, then we have never really come to grips with what sin is, and what sin does, and why God takes it so seriously. We had better be able to answer that question with a resounding "No. He is not unjust," and to be able to say that "**No**" with full conviction.

Remember who we are. We are not caterpillars. We are not worms. We are not frogs. We are not turtles. We are not lions or bears or elephants either, or even chimpanzees. We are the image-bearers of God. We have been given life. We have been freely given dominion over the earth. We have been made a little lower than the angels. We have been given a spirit that gives us the power of mind. We have been given free moral agency. We have been given all this so that we might be the image-bearers of God

Almighty, the Creator.

We have not lived our lives the way He intended. I am speaking here of all mankind, and including us with it. We have polluted the planet. We have ripped and torn it apart by violence and war. We use our environment daily as the arena of cosmic treason that makes Benedict Arnold's act mere child's play. Benedict Arnold was the great traitor of the Revolutionary War. Did you catch what I said? Sin is treason. It is disloyalty against an absolutely sovereign and holy Creator.

Do you ever stop to think that when we sin we are actually saying "No" to the righteousness of God, that we are telling Him that His law, which is a representation of His character, is no good? We are telling Him that our judgment is better than His. We are telling Him that His authority is not over us, that it does not apply to us, that we are above and beyond His jurisdiction. We are telling Him that we have the right to do whatever we want to do, and not as He commanded us.

Sin, with knowledge, is treason. It is an act of defiance. It is an act of rebellion, a revolutionary move against the supreme righteous authority of all creation. We are setting ourselves against the One to whom we owe everything. We would not even be alive without Him. We would not have the hope we have without Him. We could not look forward to the resurrection without Him. We could not look forward to eternal life without Him. We would not understand any of His purpose without Him. We could have never repented without Him. We owe everything to Him.

Did you also ever think that when we sin we become false witnesses of God, because we are the image-bearers of God? Are we are telling the world by our example that this is how the God we are the image of lives? Are we saying, "Look at me and you will see the character of God?" Are we saying that God is a liar, that God is ruthless, that God is bitter, that God is envious, that God is a murderer, that God is a slanderer, that God is an adulterer? Are we saying that He carries a chip on His shoulder and gets offended at the slightest thing, that He is all concerned about His authority and people submitting to Him?

Sin is against God. Remember, David said, "Against You, and You only have I done this evil." But sin also violates people in the process. There is nothing abstract about sin. Sin hurts people. It impairs their reputations. It crushes their dreams. It takes away from them the quality of their lives. When one dishonors God by sinning, one also dishonors and damages others who bear His image. Is it any wonder that God takes sin so seriously?

When one begins to deeply analyze what sin does, the wonder is not that God occasionally executes justice as He did with Nadab and Abihu, but rather why He allows us to continue to live. Human nature is really tricky. I have given a series of sermons on how it deceives us.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

Do you see what that is saying? Human nature is so tricky that it can deceive even one who is converted to begin to take the grace of God for granted. Human nature has the tendency to pull the human being further and further into sin. If God does not execute His wrath and His justice immediately against a person and instead gives him grace, He gives that person an opportunity to continue to live longer in order that grace may be able to work in his life, and that he be led to repentance instead. "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?"

Ecclesiastes 8:12-13 Though a sinner does evil a hundred times, and his days are prolonged, yet I surely know that it will be well with those who fear God, who fear before Him. But it will not be well with the wicked; nor will he prolong his days, which are as a shadow, because he does not fear before God.

Solomon had enough wisdom to understand that in the end they are going to get it. The wheels of God's justice may work slowly, but they work, and they never stop working. Perhaps the supreme folly of all is that man deceives himself, that because it is customary for God to be patient, longsuffering, and slow to anger and forbearing of us, we forget that His forbearance is designed to lead us to repentance. Instead of taking advantage of His patience and to come to Him for forgiveness, we have a tendency to continue in our revolt through sin. The supreme folly of a converted person is to delude himself that somehow he is going to get away with it.

Now the Old Testament, far from being a record of a war-like belligerent and wrathful God, is actually a revelation of extreme patience, mercy, and grace. We are going to look at some of the record of God's patience with mankind. We are going to look to the life of Abraham.

Genesis 15:13-14 Then He said to Abram: Know certainly that your

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descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge.

Notice "I will judge." The great supreme Judge promises Abram that He will judge the nation that holds Abram's descendants as slaves.

Genesis 15:14-16 Afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they [Abram's descendants] shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

God waited four generations for the Amorites to get so bad He felt that as an act of mercy to them He had to execute them. He executed them using the instrument of the Israelites - the former slaves, the descendants of Abram - coming into the land to dispossess them out of the land the Amorites had inhabited. There is a teaching lesson there for you and me. We can learn from this that we just have to wait when something like this is going on. We just have to wait until the righteous Judge of all mankind says the time is right for Him to execute justice.

God even considers the heathen, and gives them an opportunity to repent too. How long did God bear with Sodom and Gomorrah with what took place there before they were blasted into oblivion? I have no idea, but the Bible remarks about God's patience, about His longsuffering in dealing with those people.

1 Peter 3:18-20 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.

God waited a long time before He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, but He also waited an even longer time before He destroyed mankind in the flood.

This ties into something that we are living through today. Every one of us knows Jesus said that when the time occurs for Him to return to earth and establish His government,

and the resurrection of the just in Christ occurs, it is going to be a time like the days of Noah.

Genesis 6:5-7 Then the LOORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually, and the LOORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. So the LOORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air; for I am sorry that I have made them.

Genesis 6:11-13 The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

God waited 120 years through part of the life of Noah. All totaled, from the creation of Adam until we get to the flood was at least 1,656 years. It took that long for the end of God's patience. The end was when it had reached the point where perhaps these people would never be able to repent. Unless God intervened and kept their minds, their spirit, and their conscience from so being seared, that repentance would be impossible.

God intervened for the sake of His purpose. He did not intervene and spare Noah's life because Noah was sinless. Noah was a man who was not involved in the sins of the time. He was what we would call an upright person. He was a man of wholehearted integrity, and so he was not caught up in the iniquity of the age, and God gave him grace. God's judgment at the flood simultaneously showed both His justice in executing these people, and also His grace. He gave grace to Noah, *and* to the people He executed before their minds became absolutely seared. But He waited a long, long time. Every minute of that was an extension of His grace.

God began forming a nation from the descendants of Abraham. They found themselves to be a nation of abject slaves whose every movement was subject to the whim of others, and so they complained. They murmured, as we find there in the opening of the book of Exodus. God heard their prayers and pleas, and He, by mighty miracles, rescued them. He redeemed them from their captivity.

He executed justice on the land of Egypt. He gave grace to the nation that He was calling out. He divided the Red Sea, and they went out. How did they reward Him? How

did they treat His grace? They worshipped the golden calf. It is a miracle that He does not wipe us all off the face of the earth, as we all have the tendency to treat Him that way. Those examples are given in the Old Testament so that we can see. We are getting God's grace in tremendous abundance constantly. He does not owe us a thing, and yet He gives us everything.

Human nature has another quirk to it that is kind of interesting. In Deuteronomy 9, God writes about these things for you and me so that we will understand. He was just about ready to bring Israel into the land, and He said:

Deuteronomy 9:4-6 Do not think in your heart, after the LOORD your God has cast them out before you, saying, Because of my righteousness the LOORD has brought me in to possess this land; but it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LOORD is driving them out from before you. [You see, the iniquity of the Amorites was now full.] It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LOORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LOORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore understand that the LOORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stiff-necked people.

It is very easy to delude ourselves into thinking that because God has been so gracious He is somehow on our side, that somehow or another we have a corner on Him. But remember, this is God who says that He judges without respect of persons. He is absolutely totally fair in His judgments of everybody.

Do you see what His calling does? His grace extended to you and me has given us a responsibility. His favor extended to you and me has given us, really, a gift that the rest of the world does not have, but it has put us in obligation to Him. That obligation is something we are responsible for exercising. We have an advantage over the rest of the world because of God's grace. If we do not take advantage of what He has given to us, then it really puts us behind the eight-ball.

In Amos 3:2 God says, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." I want us to see that the gifts - the calling, the election, the gift of God's Spirit, the gift of forgiveness - become the basis of our judgment. That is sobering. But what an advantage we have over the rest of the world!

Because of God's favor we have an opportunity to be in the first resurrection, to be so much more closely associated with Him and His Son through all eternity, that there is no comparison. Remember God chose us not because we were holy. *He chose us to make us holy.* He loves you deeply. He is deeply concerned about you, but He cannot turn His back on what He is. He would cease being God if He did not consistently follow what He is, and so He cannot overlook persistent sinning, because it is rebellion.

There is no conflict between the Old Testament and the New Testament God. It was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

I Peter 2:21-23 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth, who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.

There is the pattern. There is the model. Jesus Christ committed Himself to the judgment of God, who says He judges without respect of persons.

I Peter 2:24-25 Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness, by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

If you want my opinion as to where the most brutal example of divine justice is, it is in the New Testament, not the Old. The most violent expression of God's wrath and justice is seen in the crucifixion. If there was anybody who had room to complain that He was not being treated fairly, it was Jesus Christ who was not guilty of even one sin. He was the only innocent person who ever lived, and if we are going to get upset or offended at something that is seemingly unjust, this is it.

You see, the crucifixion, like the flood and the casting out of the Amorites and so forth, is at one and the same time the most just and the most gracious act in history. It would have been absolutely diabolical of God to punish Jesus if Jesus had not first taken on Himself voluntarily the sins of all the world. Even though He was innocent to that point, once He took upon Himself that concentrated mass or load of sin, He became the most repugnant thing that ever existed on earth before God. He became an obscene and

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accursed thing, and God executed His wrath.