

From Acorn to Oak
Who is God, and what is he like? Part 15
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A father walked into his family room and saw the older of his two sons beating his younger brother mercilessly. His younger son with a bloody nose and bleeding lips looked up at his dad with frightened eyes that were streaming with tears. “Make him stop, Daddy. Make him stop!” he pleaded. The father responded, “Now son, you know I love you, so there’s no time like the present for me to teach you one of the most important facts about life. A man has to be able to stand on his own two feet. You have to learn how to take care of yourself, so try harder and tough it out.” He then turned and left the room while the older child continued to batter his younger brother.

I have a question for you: do you think the little fellow sees his father as loving him? In all the classes in which I’ve told this story, everyone has agreed that the little boy would not view his father as loving him. One reason why people answer this way is they, at least intuitively, sense that *justice is an integral part of love*. In the best relationships both qualities are present, for *justice without love is harsh, and love without justice is mere sentimentality*.

In this series on who God is and what he is like we have seen that his essence is love. *Since God’s love is completely true and genuine, it is not surprising therefore to expect that his love will include justice*. Put another way his justice is an expression of his love. God’s righteousness or justice is never separated from his love; they are two sides of the same coin. Since God is just, he will not simply look at sin and smile at it, which would be to deny and compromise his integrity, his basic character, and hurt people he loves.

In Jeremiah 9:24 we read, “but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD.” (NRSV) The NIV and TNIV translate the original Hebrew word, **חֶסֶד** *chesedh*, as kindness, but while kindness is a meaning of *chesedh*, since God’s essence is love (1 John 4:8), I prefer the translation of *chesedh* as steadfast love, also a primary meaning of *chesedh*, as in the RSV, the NRSV, and the GW. See also the NASB and the KJV, lovingkindness.

In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament the words translated justice in the English also mean righteousness and involve being correct, equitable, fair. According to what standard? As owner and ruler of the universe God defines the standard of what constitutes the justice that characterizes his holy being and which he requires for us. (Leviticus 19:2, Deuteronomy 16:20; Micah 6:8) His just acts are rooted in his essential righteousness. (Deuteronomy 32:4) Injustices are sins against people whom God loves and therefore ultimately against himself (Psalm 51:4); they are violations of his holiness.

We see the essential linkage of love and justice in many places in the Bible. In 2 Chronicles 9:8 the Queen of Sheba tells King Solomon, “Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the LORD your God. Because of the **love** of your God for Israel and his desire to uphold them forever, he has made you king over them, to maintain **justice** and righteousness.” The Psalmist speaks directly of the linkage with respect to God, as he declares, “Righteousness and **justice** are the foundation of your throne; **love** and faithfulness go before you.” (89:14) David in Psalm 101:1 adds, “I will sing of your **love** and **justice**; to you, O LORD, I will sing praise.” Matthew shows how Jesus fulfills Isaiah 42:1-4, when he writes, “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I **love**, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim **justice** to the nations.” (12:18)

Because God loves and cares about people, and to maintain his integrity and holiness, he exercises justice. Theologians discern three aspects of God’s justice. His *rectoral justice* is the love of God as revealed in the rectitude (righteousness) of his rulership over all human affairs wherein he has established government with levels of authority, laws, and rewards for the obedient as well as punishments for the disobedient. “For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our lawgiver, the LORD is our king; it is he who will save us.” (Psalm 99:4; cf. Isaiah 33:22; Romans 1:32, 13:1-7)

His *remunerative justice* is a manifestation of his love expressed in the distribution of rewards. “Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the LORD your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and increase your numbers. He will bless the fruit of your womb, the crops of our land—your new grain, new wine and oil—the calves of your herds and the lambs of your flocks in the land that he swore to your forefathers to give you.” (Deuteronomy 7:9, 12, 13; cf. Psalm 58:11) This justice is also seen in the New Testament: “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.” (Romans 2:7-11; cf. Hebrews 11:26)

His *retributive justice* expresses God’s love for those who are and will become his people in his wrath against sin; this justice manifests itself in the penalties the wicked bring on themselves. While the Bible emphasizes God’s rewarding the righteous for their faithfulness and obedience, the punishment of those who do evil is sure and certain. (Isaiah 30:18; Romans 1:32, 12:19; 2 Thessalonians 1:8) The first objective of punishment is to issue a wake-up call that will lead to behavior change for the individual and the preservation of God’s plan of salvation. (Hebrews 12:5-6, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5) This wrath all humans deserve is what Christ took on himself and is effective for all who trust and obey. Does the impact of what he did enrich your celebration of Easter?

God's rewarding his people for their faithfulness is an expression of his grace, unmerited expressions of love from him. Such rewards should not be confused with the unbiblical concept of salvation by merit. We do that which is good out of gratitude for God's grace in Christ, not to earn it. God has always blessed his people when they are obedient. Our ultimate reward is to serve him in the bliss of his eternal fellowship.

Further benefits for us

Nothing is more practical than Biblical theology. Because God is just, righteous, we have a standard for what is right, and it is good. This is a needed message in our postmodern age where many hold that there is no universal truth and thus no standard. On the contrary, we can distinguish between right and wrong. Objective and universal truth is possible only because of God's character. When one looks solely to any other standard he or she makes truth relative. The belief system of no one person or culture is authoritative for all.

God models true love and righteousness in his discipline of his people as we've seen in the texts above and in many others in the Bible, e.g., Proverbs 3:11, 12, and that discipline is life saving. Parents do well to follow his model. "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him." (Proverbs 13:24) "Discipline your son, for in that there is hope; do not be a willing party to his death." (Proverbs 19:18) (See also Hebrews 12:5-11.)

That God is just means he is fair, he has no favorites, and he is unreachable by bribe or any of the other unfair methods people use. Whenever we are victimized, oppressed, abused, or mistreated by others in any way, instead of being overcome with bitterness that eats away like a cancer within us, our response can be guided by the awareness that God will call them to account. We can take comfort in knowing that he will make the matter right sooner or later. (Psalm 73:17)

This comfort is immediate. When I have been treated unfairly and my stomach churned with anger, I have recalled Romans 12:17-21, especially verse 19, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." It is important that I am not involved in this process. God alone will be just. The person who treated me unfairly must be treated fairly. Sinner that I am, and biased in this case, I would not likely be just in my judgment of him or her. When I remember that verse I feel my stomach relax. "It's OK, I remind myself. God knows; he saw it; he'll make it right when the time is best in his sight." What peace! Thanks be to God!