

THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE JUSTICE OF GOD

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When Jesus was here on this earth, He made it clear to His disciples that His mission was to reveal a God they could love and adore. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father,” he told Philip (John 14:9,NRSV). When He scooped up children in His arms (Mark 10:16); and even when He angrily cleansed the temple, the children sensed that His anger wasn’t against them and came running to Him (Matthew 21:15). Yet even in the New Testament, God is not just gentleness and meekness, Jesus confronted evil forcefully and angrily. This revealed that God is both powerful and gentle.

Many see the God of the Old Testament as the tough One, while Jesus is the gentle, meek and mild One. But the N.T Scriptures reveal that Jesus was God in the flesh, and that He was one who would go to the ends of the earth to save a lost sheep, a wandering boy, and a thief on the cross. Quoting the O.T prophet Isaiah, Matthew explains that Jesus would never “break a bruised reed, or quench a smoking (smoldering) flax (wick)” (Mat.12:20; Isaiah 42:3).

For many, the Old Testament God is the “real” God who smashes, drowns, burns His enemies, and punishes sinners. But the New Testament God (Jesus), heals, restores and resurrects, and won’t harm a fly. Many cannot see a God who gives freedom of choice to His creatures. They cannot see

God respecting His creation, choosing a way other than His. They argue, God is a God of love, BUT He is also a God of justice; as though justice contradict His love. But what is God’s justice? Is it in some way separate from His love? Is the character of God to be seen like a two-sided coin—one full of love and mercy, while the other is justice, destructive, vindictive and punishing? One writer expressed his opinion in these words, “God is love, but God also punishes the sinner and all who do iniquity. God is not one-sided. He is not simply an infinitely loving God. He is infinitely just. He must deal with sin. He must punish the sinner.”

Many will no doubt agree with these sentiments believing that they are describing the Biblical view of God. No doubt, sin must be dealt with. No doubt sin and sinners will be destroyed and punished. But, how does God deal with sin, and how does he punish sinners? Scripture reminds us,

*“For my ways are not your ways, neither are My thoughts your thoughts. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.”
Isaiah 55:9.*

Hence, we should never equate God’s justice with man’s justice.

Many Christians have come to equate

God's justice with being part of a legal framework that involves punishment for sin. We naturally tend to associate justice with our criminal/legal system.(E.g. You do the crime, you do the time). When, then President George Bush said, "We will bring the Terrorists to justice", he meant that they would be punished appropriately for their crimes. But this understanding of the word "Justice" does not represent the Biblical meaning of "justice" (or the justice of God). It limits it to a legal offence that deserves an appropriate punishment. Many read the Bible through their culturally-coloured lens of punitive justice, which they find difficult to let go.

GOD'S JUSTICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, God's justice is described in a very different frame of reference and context than that of our modern legal-judicial system. Contrary to popular opinion, God's justice is something that we would welcome and actually like to be on the receiving end of.

For example, notice to whom God administers justice in this verse,

"Defend the poor and fatherless. Do justice (tsadaq) to the afflicted and needy" (Psalm 82:3 NKJV).

Here, the Psalmist is obviously not suggesting that the afflicted and needy should be punished. Rather, his command

is that we should help them. Justice, in this verse, refers to the action of mercy and love.

The two main Hebrew words for justice are tsadaq (or tzedakah) and mizpat (or mishpat). Based on how these words are used contextually in the Old Testament, we can build a picture of the Hebrew concept of God's justice.

"Wash yourselves clean. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice (mishpat) is done---help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights, and defend widows." Isaiah 1:16,17. GNB.

The justice involved here is to do good to the outcasts of society by correcting injustice that has been done to them. In fact, we will notice as a theme all the way through that God is not the One who uses violence when He administers justice. Rather, God's justice is to compassionately intervene against the violent actions done by others.

"This is what the Lord says to the dynasty of David: "give justice (mishpat) each morning to the people you judge! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors." (Jeremiah 21:12.NLT)

God's justice is ultimately to do what is right and to make things right by exercising compassion toward those who have been treated unfairly.

“The Lord is waiting to be kind to you. He rises to have compassion on you. The Lord is a God of justice (mishpat). (Isaiah 30:18, GW).

“Thus says the Lord God, “Enough, O Princes of Israel! Remove violence and plundering, execute justice (mispat) and righteousness (tsadaq), and stop dispossessing My people,” says the Lord GOD. “You shall have honest scales...” (Ezekiel 45:9,10, NKJV).

God’s justice is to make things right by stopping violence, rather than by executing violence on others. Injustice is described as robbing, cheating, and mistreating people, while God’s justice is to begin treating people in fairness—the way God would treat them.

In this passage, both “justice (mispat) and righteousness (tsadaq)” are used together. Other contextual examples are:

Abraham and his family were commanded “to do righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19,NKJV)

“David administered justice and righteousness for all his people”. (2 Samuel 8:15, NASB).

Job “put on righteousness, and it clothed me; my justice was like a robe and a turban.” (Job 24:19,NASB)

Of God, it is said, “May he judge your people with righteousness, and your

poor with justice (Psalm 72:2,NRSV).

“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you” (Psalm 89:14,NRSV).

NONE OF THESE EXAMPLES INVOLVE AN EXTERNALLY IMPOSED PUNISHMENT OR ANY LEGAL, JUDICIAL, PUNITIVE CONCEPT.

God’s command to us is to “act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place” (Jeremiah 22:3, NRSV). As one author Frank Loewenberg in his book, *From Charity to Social Justice, puts it this way:*

“Jewish kings were commanded to practice mishpat u’tzedakah. The literal translation of this term is justice and righteousness” or “justice and charity”. Classical as well as modern commentators agree that this command does not refer to “courtroom justice and charity” but to social justice. The major wrongdoing to which the prophets objected was not the perversion of the judicial process, but oppression and exploitation of the poor by the political elite and the wealthy classes....One modern political

scientist wrote, “The execution of righteousness and justice in the royal domain refers primarily to acts on behalf of the poor and less fortunate classes of the people.” This policy was implemented primarily by means of social legislation rather than by court judgments. The idea (or ideal) of social justice has a long history in Judaism”.

So, the Hebrew concept of justice, as manifested through acts of mercy and compassion towards those mistreated and the outcasts of society, runs consistently throughout the entire old Testament, beginning with the books of Moses.

“He executes justice (mishpat) for the orphan and the widow, and shows his love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.” (Deut. 10:18, NASB)

“You shall not pervert the justice (mishpat) due an alien or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge.” Deut. 24:17, NASB).

In the Old Testament, to “bring justice” does not mean to bring punishment, but to bring healing and reconciliation. Justice means to make things right by correcting injustice. Justice is ultimately an expression of mercy—it is God’s mercy in action.

“I walk the way of righteousness (tsadaq); I follow the path of justice (mishpat). Proverbs 8:20, GNB).

This proverb is an example of Hebrew poetry, which is not based on rhyme but on repetition, where the second line of the verse adds meaning and depth to the first line. So, the path of justice, then, is the way of righteousness. In other words, the path of justice is the path of right doing in an unjust world. (See also Prov.2:8,9).

“What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy (kindness), and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8.

Justice is something that we “do”. True justice requires making things right by manifesting the love of God through acts of loving-kindness and mercy. For Jewish people today, the word tsadaq (or tzedakah) is still associated with acts of charity and loving restoration. A right conception of God’s justice, however, leads us to see that how we treat people is the most important Christian obligation of all, because “to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.” (Prov.21:3, NRSV).

So once again, how does the Old Testament define God’s justice?

“This is what the LORD of Armies says: ‘Administer real justice (mishpat), be compassionate and kind to each other’ (Zechariah 7:9 GW). God’s justice is a compassionate, kind, and loving intervention in a world full of great injustice.

THE PUNISHMENT OF GOD

In the Bible, there is a long list of stories, from the Flood to Sodom and Gomorrah and the lake of fire that many use to interpret the justice of God. They argue, “If God does not punish, He is not a God of justice.” But a correct understanding of the mechanism of the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah will show how they were “punished” by God. They were simply, God allowing them to reap what they had sown, not God causing or bringing the destruction upon them as His means of satisfying justice. (See our book, “The Character of God, The Best News in the Universe” for an explanation of the mechanism of destruction, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture). For an example see Job 22:15–17.

According to the Old Testament, God does not punish people, (drowning and burning them up) for the sake of satisfying His justice, but He allows them to reap what they had sown (Gal.6:6-8); they having made their own irreversible choice of not wanting God or His protection, hence He was forced to leave them alone to reap the consequences of their choices.

Scripture reveals that the real cause for sickness, suffering, disease and death is always separation from God. Isaiah 59:2,3; Romans 5:12; Romans 13:10; James 1:13-17; Roman 6:23; Deut.31:16–18; Job 1,2.

Yet, there is a discipline from God

(sometimes referred to as punishment) that any parent can identify with when their children stubbornly pursue a course that is dangerous and would not heed anyone’s advice or counsel. Sometimes a loving parent may “punish” by taking away certain privileges for a period of time with the intention to discipline and heal, but never to cause hurt , pain or to kill.

“I will discipline you , but with justice; I cannot let you go unpunished.” (Jeremiah 30:11,NLT).

“Visiting the iniquity of the fathers unto the children unto the third and fourth generation...” Exodus 20:3,4.

God’s actions always spring from pure, harmless love as of a loving parent, and always for the purpose of healing and restoration. His clearest revelation of His character was in the life, character and teachings of His Son who came to reveal the kind of person that God is, clear up misconceptions about God and to show us how to interpret the O.T Scriptures. Hebrews 1:1-3; John 5:19.

Our God is not like a stern judge who is waiting to inflict a painful sentence upon those who do wickedly. He is instead more like a physician waiting to heal his sick patients who are infected with selfishness, pride, jealousy, and hate, as well a host of other spiritual maladies.

The Bible tells us that sin carries its own intrinsic punishment which ultimately

leads to death. (Prov.8:35, 36; Psalm 34:21; Prov.11:5, 6,19; Prov.12:28; Prov.14:12) There are many who believe that there is really nothing wrong with sin, only that it troubles, upsets, and angers God and makes Him come and trouble us. And that if it were not for God we could go on sinning forever. The problem is not sin, it is God when we sin, they reason. They do not see that sin separates us from God, and brings sickness, suffering, disease, punishment, and death upon us. (Isaiah 59:2,3; Rom.5:12). **These are not the result of God, for the sake of justice, punishing us, but are the result of God's respect for His creatures' freedom of choice, and His being forced to give them up to the consequences of that choice.**

The Biblical concept of justice has nothing to do with God adding on additional pain to settle the score of our suffering. It is not payback justice, retributive justice, legal justice, and justice that primarily involves an imposed, painful penalty and a punishment that fits the crime.

THE PUNISHMENT OF JESUS-- AN EXAMPLE OF DIVINE JUSTICE

The life and character of Jesus exemplified Divine justice. He “went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil” (Acts 10:38). Jesus’ repeated rebuke to the Pharisees was that, even though they were religious outwardly, they were not merciful and kind to the outcasts of society. In Matthew 23:23, we see that Jesus’ definition

of justice or judgment is the exact same concept as in the Old Testament. He was basically saying, “You are dealing unjustly with others. Why don’t you practice mercy and compassion to those around you? That is what God is really after. God would much rather have you treat others with love than to spend so much time tithing your herbs and spices.”

This was the whole mission of His life and ministry,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.” Luke 4:18, 19.

Even when Jesus chose to take on the sins of the world upon Himself as though they were His very own, the Father had to deal with Him as a common sinner. (Isaiah 53:4—6, 8, 10, 12). He suffered the consequence of the wrath of God against sin upon Himself. Sin caused a separation between Him and His Father so much so that He cried out,

“My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me.” Matthew 27:46.

It was sin that crushed out the life of Christ. He suffered under Divine Justice and He knew what justice meant (See Rom.8:32—

delivered= wrath Gk). The Biblical definition of wrath means God giving up or delivering people to the consequences of their choice (See Romans 1:18, 20, 22, 24,28.). Justice meant God acting justly, respecting the choice of His Son and allowing Him to reap the consequences of His choice. This was the retributive justice of God that many do not understand, it is His “strange act”. Many do not sense the offensive character of sin or the retributive justice that will fall upon the sinner who has rejected God. Hence,

“He was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”Isaiah 53:12.

The Scriptures tell us that God delights in judgment or justice, and this justice/ judgment does not involve punishment or inflicting pain on His part.

“Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.” Jeremiah 9:23,24.

Just as a shadow is the result of the light of the sun, but is not caused by the sunlight, but by

an object/obstacle interposing between the light, so the wicked are destroyed by God’s justice (His acting justly) even though it is not caused by God’s justice.

When the woman who was “caught in the very act” of adultery was brought to Jesus, He demonstrated and administered God’s restorative justice and mercy by defending and protecting her who was being abused and mistreated.

Jesus’ concept of justice calls us to love and defend victims of our society, such as this woman. Even His call for repentance (“Go and sin no more”) was uttered with kindness and was designed to motivate this woman to a way of living that was not self-destructive.

This is the kind of justice the Messiah came to bring. (See Matthew 12:18–20). Jesus came to bring real justice by healing the sick, the blind, and the deaf. In the person of Jesus (God with flesh on), God’s justice came to make things right by eating with sinners and tax collectors, the despised of society.

Unfortunately, this kind of justice was not at all what the people of the day were hoping for in their Messiah. They wanted a conquering hero who would punish their enemies. They despised the compassionate treatment of lepers, and were angered by his acts of healing a poor man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. They despised the outcasts of society with whom Jesus ate and associated. They refused to acknowledge

a King who chose a group of fishermen to be His disciples. They despised the kind of justice that Jesus came to bring, so they nailed Him to a cross.

At the Cross, we see no violence, no punishment coming directly from the hand of God. Instead, it was a mob of religious yet violent murderers, torturing the Son of God to death. On the Cross, instead of calling down fire from heaven on these guilty people, we hear the innocent Son of God saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” God is like that. This returning of love, kindness and forgiveness in the face of hatred is the radical restorative justice of God. At the Cross, our desire for punishment, our violence, and our hatred were replaced by God’s forgiveness, God’s non-violence, and God’s love. God’s justice is a social justice that is restorative and healing, not retributive. Even our church discipline should be to the end of restoration. While they may not be functioning/ministering in church capacity, the period should be used to restore them back into harmony with the church, they sensing their own responsibility in the process.

One advocate of restorative practice, Sharon Baker in her book “Stricken by God” describes it beautifully in these words,

“While retributive justice seeks to fit the punishment to the crime, attempting to control wrongdoing through punishment, restorative

justice forgives the crime and seeks to redeem the wrongdoing through a repairing of the relationship....At the Cross, we see God turning away the opportunity to exact retributive justice and the demand for retribution, and instead God would choose to forgive. At the Cross we come face to face with the shameful depravity of our own sin by coming face to face with the One who has the right and power to punish, but who instead loves and forgives...In the face of human hatred and hardness of heart, God still managed to redeem.”

Returning violence and hatred with forgiveness and love does not often fit into our understanding of justice, but thankfully, God is much bigger and much better than we can possibly imagine Him to be! At the Cross we see the union of love and justice, but not in a way it is usually understood. The Cross was the outpouring of God’s love as an act of restorative “making things right” justice, not punitive or retributive justice.

Love is not in conflict with justice, love is how justice comes about, because the new Testament understanding of justice is ultimately not about punishment but about making things right again.