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God the Judge

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Introduction

How do you like to think about God? How do you picture him in your mind's eye?

The Bible uses many different terms to describe Him: King, Lord, Father, Savior, Shepherd, Potter, to name a few.

You may have a favorite. Perhaps you prefer to think about God as a *perfect Father* providing for His children, or a *good shepherd* tending His sheep, or a great and powerful *King* ruling over his kingdom.

Today's message is the last in our sermon series this summer on the character of God.

The title of this sermon series is Who? *I AM.*

It comes from Moses' interaction with Go at the burning bush, when He asked God how he should respond when the people of Israel ask what His name is

> *God said to Moses, "I AM who I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"*
>
> *Exodus 3:14*

The verb translated I AM is related to The word YHWH, which is written as LORD in capital letters in the Bible.

This is his name: **I AM who I AM**. It is a statement of His self-existence. He defines himself. He is simply the God who is there.

Why should this matter to us?

God is who he is. We are not free to think of him however we like.

It can be tempting to pick out certain aspects of God's character that we like and focus only on those, ignoring others.

But, we need to learn of Him as he reveals Himself to us.

Toward this end, over the summer we have been looking at a number of his different attributes: His Love, His Mercy, His truthfulness, His Wisdom, His Power, His Holiness, the fact that He doesn't change, that He is everywhere.

In closing the series this week, I would like to speak about God as Judge, and consider his justice and wrath.

These are not popular subjects. As this is the last in the series, it may seem that when it came to dividing the topics among the various speakers, all the other cards were dealt out and I got what was left (which was not the case).

Why are these unpopular subjects? I think that there are at least two reasons:

1. In today's world, the concept of judgment has a strong negative connotation. We are made to believe that morality is simply a matter of personal choice. One person may choose a particular lifestyle while another may choose a very different one, and both are perfectly valid. The only thing that we cannot say, we are told, is that one is right and the other is wrong. The only wrong thing is to make a judgment about someone else's choice. After all, doesn't the Bible say "do not judge"?

2. The second reason is that when it comes to questions of judgment and particularly wrath, we somehow think it is unworthy of God. Why? Because we project human qualities on Him. We think of what it is like when we, or someone we know, fly off into a rage, and we cannot imagine that this is fitting for a loving God. So we downplay this side of His character.

But if we are to get to know the true God, the God who is there, we can't project our ideas of what we think God *should be like* onto Him. We have to learn of Him as he reveals himself in Scripture.

With this introduction, the rest of what I want to say is broken into four parts:

- First, I want to talk about *God's justice* – that is the fact that God is the very definition of what it means to be just.
- Second, I will talk about *judgment* – the fact that God enforces justice.
- Third, I will talk about the *wrath* of God, which is his right reaction to evil and injustice.
- Finally, I will close by thinking about how these aspects of God's character can co-exist in a God who is love.

1. God's Justice

What do you think of when you hear the word ***justice***?

When we talk about the need for justice in the world, we mean that everyone should be treated rightly and fairly; that everyone gets what they deserve.

But what is justice as a character trait?

> *The quality of being just; conformity to the principles of righteousness and rectitude in all things; strict performance of moral obligations; equity; uprightness.*

The word translated "justice" in the Old Testament is very close to the word "righteousness" and is often translated as such. To be just basically means to be righteous – to make right judgments.

But what does it mean for God to "conform to the principles of righteousness"? Where do those principles come from? What determines what is right and wrong?

Is there some sort of fundamental, universal law, independent of God, which determines what is right and just. Is God righteous because He happens to conform to such a law?

If this were the case, it would imply some higher power that established such a law – a power higher than God Himself. *This cannot be.* The God of the Bible – the God who is there – created all that there is. There is no power or being that he did not create.

This means that it is God himself who defines what is right and good. It is tied to His very nature: His holiness, His purity, His moral perfection. David expresses this in Ps. 19:

> *Psalm 19:7-9*
>
> *7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; . . .*
>
> *8 the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;*
> *the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;*
>
> *9 . . . the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.*

His will, his plan, his desires define what is right.

> *Psalm 89:14*
>
> *Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;*

God, who created the universe from nothing, is its ultimate King and Ruler. What is right and just is defined by who He is. What is good or bad is determined by its conformity to His nature.

Those of you who work for a company, isn't it the CEO who often sets the values of the company which become the DNA of the organization.

In God's case it plays out in a cosmic scale as he is the "CEO" of the entire universe. As apologist and theologian William Lane Craig put it:

> "Kindness is good because that's the way God is; cruelty is evil because it is inconsistent with God's nature. Therefore He issues commands that forbid behavior which is cruel and prescribes behavior which is kind."
>
> (William Lane Craig)

There is no higher principle that God has to satisfy to be considered good or righteous. He defines the principles. Doing what is right for God is being consistent with His nature, which is all He could do.

This is very different from what our society today professes. While on the one hand much of the world puts a high value on justice and equality of treatment, when it comes to the issue of morality, it is a different story.

- It says that morality is private – all that matters is that one doesn't judge someone else's sense of what is right and wrong.

The Bible says that it is God who defines what is good and right – it is a reflection of His character.

It is not for each individual to decide this for him/herself.

What are some of the implications of this?

Let me ask you a question – Do you ever blame God for things? Do you ever find yourself "mad at God".

Sometimes it may simply be that life is not going the way we have decided it should be going, and we stand in judgment of God.

Much of the world thinks that it can stand in judgment of God. Things happen that are difficult to understand – a natural disaster or a personal tragedy, and many blame God.

But in doing this aren't we are judging God by our own standards of what is right and wrong? Do we have the right to do so?

Let me ask you another question to those of you who have teenagers. How many of you have had them say to you: "You are just too old fashioned. People don't think like that any more"

For example, it is almost accepted practice these days that living with one's boyfriend or girlfriend before getting married is a good way to see two people are compatible.

Many think that standards of right and wrong change with time, as society evolves.

But does God's character change? Does His holiness change? Does His principles of what is right and wrong change? I think not.

This brings me to my next point:

2. God's judgment

If we were to stand in the middle of Place St. François and ask people passing by what they think of the idea of God as judge, what do you think their responses would be?

Most would probably feel uncomfortable. Some may be indignant: who is He to judge? They don't think that they are accountable to anyone.

Your response may depend on your circumstances. For someone who is oppressed, undergoing persecution and crying out for justice, the concept of God as Judge might be comforting.

If we turn to the Bible, there are few things that are stressed more strongly that God's role as the ultimate, righteous judge. You find it throughout the pages of Scripture.

Just to give a few examples . . .

In interceding for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham addresses Him as the Judge of all the earth:

Gen 18:25

Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

David states it clearly:

Psalm 9:7-8

7 But the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice,
8 and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.

And Paul in the New Testament:

Acts 17: 31

31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead."

Not only is He given the title of Judge, but there are many examples of how He has executed judgment in history:

- Adam and Eve – by their banishment from the Garden
- The corrupt world in Noah's day – judged by the flood
- Sodom and Gomorrah – fire and brimstone.
- The Israelites who worshipped the golden calf
- The nation of Israel, for not being willing to take over the promised land – 40 years in the desert.
- In the NT – Ananias and Sapphira for lying to God.

The Bible makes 4 clear statements regarding God's role as Judge of all the Earth.

1. God has the authority to judge.

This is what many people contest – who gives God the right to judge? But if He is indeed the creator of the universe, who made it out of nothing, does he not have the right to not only determine what is right and wrong but also to ensure that justice is done?

2. He is the perfectly just judge.

There are two aspects of judging rightly: having just standards and knowing the facts of the situation.

- Since God is the very definition of what is right, he will judge according to His perfect standard.

- The fact that God is omniscient – that He knows everything, even what is in the depths of our heart, means that His judgments will be perfect.

  He doesn't need to wait for a security leak on the Ashley Madison website to determine the truth about us.

3. God must execute justice.

What good would a court of law be if it could only pronounce guilt or innocence but then not carry out any kind of sentence. The entire justice system would be a joke! What good would it be to have rules if there were never any consequences of breaking them – people could do whatever they wanted. If no one ever received what they deserved, would that be a just system. In fact justice without some sort of retribution is not justice at all.

What would God be like if he saw injustice, judged it to be so, but then decided not to do anything about it. Could we really consider him a just God in this case?

God's moral perfection leads Him to ultimately give people what they deserve. If He didn't He wouldn't be holy and righteous.

We want justice to be carried out for others – we have an intuitive sense that it is right – but what about ourselves? Do we fully understand what just treatment of our own sins should be? If we do, it should drive us to Jesus, who paid the penalty for our sins.

4. God is patient in his application of justice

As we look around us in the world, we see injustice everywhere. Dishonest people prosper and honest people suffer. One might conclude that God is not just. However, the Bible encourages us not to mistake God's patience for injustice.

> *2 Peter 3:9*
>
> *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

Evil and injustice will exist, but in the end, at the final day of judgment, all will receive their just reward.

The fact that God will judge the earth and justice will be done have implications for how we live:

- It allows us to live the kind of lifestyle that Jesus spoke of in the sermon on the mount:

> *Matt 5:38-39*
>
> ***38*** *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* ***39*** *But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*

Because we know that Justice will ultimately be done, we can endure injustice.

> *Romans 12:19*
>
> *19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

Which leads me to my third point:

3. God's wrath: He is not impassionate in His reaction to evil

Have you ever been at the receiving end of someone's wrath? I had such an experience as a teenager, and although it was so long ago, it is still so firmly etched in my mind.

I played on our high school basketball team, and each summer during my high school years I would go away to basketball camp, where we met other players from all over the country and were coached by university coaches. When I was 16 I went to a camp where I was coached by a who was the coach at a small university near the camp. While he was quite a reasonable coach when we were training, during the matches this guy would be totally out of control. I remember when he didn't like the call of the referee, he kicked a chair out onto the court.

On the last day of camp we had a tournament, to see which team was the best. Near the end of the game, with only perhaps a minute left I made a mistake of judgment, which put us in a situation where we could lose the game. Our coach called a time out, and gathered the team on the sidelines. He lit into me like you wouldn't believe, using all kinds of strong language that I wouldn't repeat. I had never experienced such a rage. Even though I had played a good game up until that point, he totally humiliated me, and I was devastated. Even though the game was not over, I stood up, walked off the court and out of the gym. As that was the last day of camp, I don't think that I spoke to him again.

In light of an experience such as this, and maybe you have had a similar one, it is difficult to think about wrath being associated with God. One can understand His being perfectly righteous, and out of His moral perfection ensuring that justice is done, but it can be difficult to understand how the God of the Bible could be angry and wrathful in the same way as my basketball coach.

As a result we sometimes feel that God is unworthy of wrath, that it is unfitting of Him, and we don't speak about it because we want to protect His reputation.

But, the Bible authors feel no hesitation in writing about God's wrath. The apostle Paul, for example:

> *Romans 1:18*
>
> *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.*
>
> *Romans 2:5*
>
> *But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*
>
> *Romans 2:8*
>
> *but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.*

How do we reconcile this with what we understand of God's character as a loving and gracious God?

Some would want to say that God of the OT was a God of wrath, but that Jesus is a God of love. However, this ignores the fact that Jesus spoke about judgment and hell as much as anyone in the Bible.

(i) We have to deal with misconceptions about God's wrath.

We cannot project our ideas upon God and imagine His wrath from what we see in sinful man

Wrath is not God flying off the handle in fitful anger. It is not uncontrolled, impulsive, irrational fury (as it was in my basketball coach).

J.I. Packer says it this way:

"God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is." (J. I. Packer, Knowing God)

God's wrath is the right reaction to sin and rebellion. It is a reflection of his moral perfection. If he didn't respond this way He would not be just; he would not be righteous.

Packer goes on to say that it is:

"the right reaction of moral perfection in the creator toward moral perversity in the creature." (J. I. Packer, Knowing God)

You might feel that this is a bit over the top on God's part to respond in wrath. It can be difficult to get a sense of the idea of righteous anger, but I think that we have experienced similar feelings in certain situations.

Most of you will recognize this picture – it is a picture of 21 Egyptian Christians who were about to be beheaded by ISIS militants. I will warn you not to go on Google and search for more detailed photos of this event – what you will find is totally revolting.

Our utter revulsion at such an act may give you a sense of how offensive sin and rebellion are to a God who is infinitely holy and infinitely righteous. We would agree that such an act deserves not only justice, but the full wrath of God (although we may see things a bit differently when we think about our own sin).

John Murray puts it this way: "God's wrath is "the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness" (John Murray, Epistle to the Romans)

(ii) God's wrath involves giving people what they deserve

Rom 2:5-6

5 *But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.*

6 *He will render to each one according to his works:*

(iii) It is something that people choose

John 3:19

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

- The wrath of God shows us that there is meaning to the Universe – that it is not morally neutral. Right and wrong are objectively real and the way one lives has eternal consequences.

- The wrath of God also makes us understand the seriousness of sin – how offensive it is to God. It matters to Him and it should matter to us.

  If sin doesn't matter to us, if we are casual about it, if we continue to sin with impunity and without regret, then we should fear God's judgment and wrath.

  Heb 10:26

  [26]For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, [27]but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Paul tells us in 2 Cor 13:5

> "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith."

Our attitude toward sin, and grief over our own sin, is part of that test, and we would do well to apply it to ourselves.

But I want to make one important distinction:

- Those who have repented of their sin and confess Christ as Lord should never consider suffering in this life as judgment and wrath from God. It is something else.

  Rom 8:1

  There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

It may be that God is using the difficulties in your life to shape you, to make you more holy, more like Jesus. But you should never consider it as judgment for your sin – sin that Christ has paid for.

Example: My wife getting leukemia. We never once considered this a punishment from God, but rather something to draw us closer to Him.

4. The coming together of God's wrath and His love in the cross

In closing this message this morning, and this sermon series, I want to come back to the basic theme of the series – that of Knowing God.

Assuming that a God who created us wants us to know Him, how could He who is infinitely holy, the very definition of righteousness and justice, a God of wrath, and at the same time whose very essence is love, communicate His true nature to His creatures? How can finite creatures like ourselves ever come close to comprehending Him?

I want to address this question by first asking another question: Who killed Jesus?

Some would say that the Romans did it, since they, under the authority of Pontius Pilate, actually crucified him.

Some would say that the Jews killed him, since the Jewish leaders demanded of the Romans that he be put to death.

You might even say that WE killed him, that He died because of our sins. Hear what Isaiah wrote:

> *Isaiah 53: 5-6*
>
> ***5*** *But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*
>
> ***6*** *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

But if we read further in Is 53:

> ***10*** *Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him;*

It was **God Himself** who put Jesus to death

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

> *21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

The apostles as they prayed after being threated by the Jewish Council showed that they understood this:

Acts 4:27-28

> ***27*** *for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,* ***28*** *to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.*

This was God's plan.

Have you ever asked yourself the question: "Why did God choose to do it this way?"

Why this plan? Couldn't He have planned the history of our universe in any other way?

This was the plan that would demonstrate to His creatures His true nature. This is how He could show us who He is.

God's holiness and his righteous, his justice and His wrath, His love and his grace all come to their climax at the cross.

Jesus single-mindedness in His mission, knowing that he would suffer and die on the cross for our sins reveals the depths of his love for His creatures.

The dread of what was to come, expressed as he sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane reveals the reality of God's total abhorrence of sin, and the wrath that our sin deserves.

The reality of that wrath reached its fullness as he was forsaken by God the Father as He hung on the cross.

If we want to know God in His fullness, then we must understand the cross, where His love and His wrath are most clearly manifest!

This is the God who is there – the great I AM.