

The Justice of God

by Walton Weaver

It is easy for a person to lose a sense of God's justice. Perhaps this is due in a large measure to the fact that so much is said about God's love in the New Testament. We certainly do not want to overlook this great theme because it is central and necessary for our redemption. Love is the central motive that brings one to Christ, and it is the dominating factor in our commitment to Christ-"The love of Christ constrains us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

Side by side with this grand announcement of God's abounding love, though, is the warning that while God is merciful as well as just in providing redemption through Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:23-26). He will also manifest His righteousness in taking vengeance when He pronounces judgment upon the world in the last day (Rom. 3:3-6). If we are to believe that God is righteous in saving us from wrath through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, then we must believe also that He will be righteous in punishing the disobedient at the coming of our Lord. While we must ever remember the goodness of God, we must never forget His severity either (Rom 11:22).

Fear God

Peter admonishes, "Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (1 Pet. 3:17). This admonition to "fear God" is almost a thing of the past in pulpits around the world. Yet, hundreds of years before our New Testament was written, Solomon said, "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments..." (Eccl. 12:13, NASB).

No one regards fear as the highest motive for serving God. The love of Christ is by far the best reason and motivation. But fear has an important place in religion, as in other things, and we must not lose sight of that fact. God is not a terror from whom we must flee, but when we lose the sense of God's justice we lose too much.

How many people do you know who have ceased to be afraid to do wrong? All of us know that this is pretty well the rule rather than the exception any more. We have just about reached the place in our history where Christianity has been reduced to a thou-shalt-not-be-punished philosophy. And, I would dare say, this is the primary reason that Christianity is not effective as it was in years gone by. If you are looking for the primary weakness of the age it is that men have been so busy magnifying the love of God that they have overlooked the justice of God. The critics of Christianity have been successful in eliminating the teachings of hell and eternal punishment from the Scriptures. This has been possible only because the "friends" of Christianity have wanted it so. Most people want God, but they want a God who will permit them to live as they please and go their evil ways unrestrained, and a God, who, at last, will save them from their just punishment.

The Unknown God

People think they know God, when the only God they know is a God of love. The unknown God of our time is the God of justice, the God whose "eyes are too pure to approve evil" and who "canst not look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13).

The great lesson that needs to be learned in our day is that "'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. And again, 'The Lord will judge His people' " (Heb. 10:30). The writer who quoted these words from the Lord, prefaced his quotation with the words, "For we know Him who said..." Our problem is, our generation does not know the God who spoke these words of warning. This God is an unknown God of our times. The God of the Bible is the God of love and the God of justice.

Why are we admonished to "fear God"? Because "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). The awful gravity of the judgment is drawn out for us in this expression. When Paul preached about the judgment to come before Felix, the Scripture says, "Felix was afraid" (Acts 24:25). He should have been afraid, and so should all others who are not prepared to meet God in judgment. Even though Felix said "no" to Jesus Christ and waited for a more convenient season, at least he did understand the severity of God and seems to have realized the consequences of his refusal to change.

Fear And God's Commandments

In the context where the Hebrew writer speaks of God's vengeance and judgment (Heb. 10:30-31), as just noted, he speaks also of a "fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries" (v. 27), and a "worse punishment" for those who reject Christ than for those who died without mercy when they rejected Moses' law (vv. 28-29). This is strong language, but it draws out vividly the absolute justice of God. It points to the time when all those who oppose God will be brought under His authority. At that time all of God's enemies will be incapable of further resistance. A just recompense of reward will be meted out. There is payday some day.

When God's law is made known to man it is to be received as the very voice of God, as God Himself speaking and making known His will. We reject God by rejecting His word, or transgressing His commandments, and His commandments are equal to the very voice of God. When Israel transgressed God's law, she did so by "not obeying Thy voice" (Dan. 9:11,14). When Saul "transgressed the command of the Lord" he "rejected the word of the Lord" (1 Sam. 15:24,26). To fail to keep God's command was the same thing as not to "obey the voice of the Lord" (vv. 19-20,22). So when those who broke Moses' law were punished, they received a just recompense from God because they had transgressed God's law, or rejected God Himself by refusing to hear His voice when He spoke or made Himself known through Moses.

God deals with us in the same way in this age. We reject Christ by rejecting His word (cf. Jn. 12:48). We must believe whatever He has said about Himself and what other New Testament writers have said about Him. We must do whatever He Himself has commanded, or whatever He has commanded through the other New Testament writers who have revealed His will to us. To fail to obey God today, or to fail to obey His Son, Jesus Christ, is to lead to a "fearful expectation of judgment." Solomon warned hundreds of years before Christ, "Fear God, and keep His commandments" (Eccl. 12:13). The reason God often points man to a healthy fear that will lead to a proper respect for God's authority is that God expects man to be submissive and to walk in His ways. It does make a difference what you believe, and it does matter how you live. To Christians, Paul admonishes, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

Peter asks, "What will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17). Remember, to obey the gospel is to obey the very voice of God. To fail or refuse to obey the gospel is to reject the voice of God. Does it matter whether or not you obey the gospel? Certainly it matters! Peter would not have raised the question if it did not matter. Do not take this matter too lightly. It always matters whether we do God's will or not. Only those who have no fear of God would say it makes no difference. Paul says, "When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:7-9). Now, does it matter whether one obeys the gospel of Christ? Paul answers Peter's question in no uncertain terms, and his answer shows that it does matter.

My friend, you may fuss and fume when someone reads to you some command of God. You may argue about the command to repent (Lk. 13:3, 5; Acts 17:30-31; Acts 2:38), or you may argue about the command to be baptized (Jn. 3:3, 5; Acts 2:38; 22:16), but these commands will face you in the final judgment. To fail to obey these and other commands of God is to "reject the counsel of God" just as surely as the Pharisees did when they refused to be baptized of John (Lk. 7:29-30). The writer of Hebrews warns, "See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven" (Heb. 12:25).

Conclusion

God wants us to be submissive and obedient. He calls on us to acknowledge with the mouth that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Son of God (Matt. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:9-10; Acts 8:37), to repent of our sins (Acts 2:38; 17:30-31), and to be baptized into Christ for the remission of sins (Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27; Acts 2:38; 22:16). Upon obedience to these commands, the Lord will add us to His church (Acts 2:38, 41, 47).

We must then continue to be obedient to the Lord as long as we live, even willing to give our life for His cause if necessary (1 Cor. 15:58; Rev. 2:10). This includes meeting

regularly with other Christians, worshiping God scripturally, and living a clean life so as to be a good example to others. It means to abide in the doctrine of Christ (2 Jn. 9), not to add to or take away from the word of God (Rev. 22:18-19), and not to think beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4:6).

How easy it is to think a thing is right just because we want it to be right. That was Saul's tragic mistake (1 Sam. 15), and that is the mistake of many today who have no fear of God because they do not know the God of severity or justice. We may disobey God by simply failing to respect His silence (Lev. 10:1-2). This is the same thing as to add to the word of God. We may disobey God by failing to carry out His commands fully, as in the case of Saul (1 Sam. 15:1-33, esp vv. 10, 19, 22-23,25-26). Whatever is the nature of the disobedience, the right kind of fear for God would cause us to be more careful in our thinking, as well as in our practice. This will help us avoid sinning against God. It will help us always to want to be well-pleasing to God. May we all come to "fear God and keep his commandments." Let this be our aim in all that we do so God may be glorified through us, and we may believe unto the saving of the soul.