

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

THEOLOGY PROPER

The Doctrine of God

UNIT 5: THE COMMUNICABLE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Lesson 15

The Righteousness and Justice of God

The God Who Always Does What Is Right

Key Texts: Genesis 18:25; Psalm 89:14; Romans 3:21–26; 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8

Righteousness and Justice Are the Foundation of His Throne

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Series Verse

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36, NASB 1995

Introduction

In Lesson 14 we encountered the crown of all the divine attributes: the holiness of God. We heard the seraphic anthem, stood with Isaiah in his undoing, received the coal of cleansing, and were sent, as Isaiah was sent, to declare the glory of the Holy One. We established, following Sproul, that holiness is not one attribute among others but the attribute that qualifies all others: God's love is holy love, His justice is holy justice, His grace is holy grace, His wrath is holy wrath.

Now, in Lesson 15, we take up the attribute that stands most immediately adjacent to holiness in the architecture of the divine moral character: the righteousness and justice of God. If holiness is the root, the fundamental purity and otherness of the divine being, then righteousness and justice are among its most immediate and most socially significant fruits. Righteousness (Hebrew *tsedaqah*, Greek *dikaiosynē*) is God's perfect moral rectitude in His own character: His absolute conformity to the standard of all that is right, which is identical with His own nature. Justice (Hebrew *mishpat*) is the expression of that righteousness in His governance of the universe: His administration of the moral order in a manner that reflects His character, rewarding the good and punishing evil with perfect equity and absolute reliability.

These two attributes, righteousness and justice, are at once the most publicly significant of all the divine perfections (they govern God's dealings with every human being who has ever lived), the most theologically fraught (they generate the problem of justification that is the central question of the gospel), and the most urgently needed in the pastoral ministry of the church (for a generation that has largely lost its sense of divine moral seriousness, the righteousness and justice of God are the most needed corrective to the therapeutic, sentimental religion that dominates our cultural landscape). In this lesson we will define these attributes, explore their biblical foundations, press into the most searching theological problem they raise, and then find in the cross of Jesus Christ the most magnificent resolution that any attribute of God could possibly demand.

I. Defining Righteousness: God's Perfect Conformity to His Own Nature as the Standard

The doctrine of divine righteousness begins with a question of normativity: against what standard is God's righteousness measured? This question is more complex than it might initially appear, because any answer that places the standard of righteousness outside of or above God raises the immediate problem of what grounds that external standard. If there is a moral law higher than God to which God is accountable, then that moral law is more fundamental than God, which compromises the divine aseity and sovereignty. If there is a standard of rightness derived from creation or from rational consensus, then God's righteousness is contingent on features of the created order, which is equally problematic.

The Reformed theological tradition, following Augustine and Calvin, has addressed this problem with a conviction grounded in the whole witness of Scripture: God's

righteousness is not His conformity to an external moral standard but His perfect conformity to His own nature, which is itself the standard of all righteousness. God is not righteous because He meets the requirements of a moral code that exists independently of Him; He is righteous because His character is the ultimate definition and ground of all that is morally right. The good is not defined by something outside God and then found to be characteristic of God; the good is defined by what God is, and the moral order of the universe is the expression of that character in the governance of creation.

This understanding of divine righteousness has two immediate and important implications. First, it means that God's righteousness is absolutely self-consistent and absolutely reliable: because the standard of righteousness is identical with His own nature, and because His nature is immutable, His righteousness does not fluctuate, does not grant exceptions on the basis of favoritism, and cannot be corrupted by any consideration outside itself. "For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; the upright will behold His face" (Psalm 11:7, NASB 1995). Second, it means that every creaturely standard of justice and righteousness is ultimately derived from and accountable to the divine standard. When we speak of justice, fairness, equity, and moral rectitude in human affairs, we are speaking of imperfect, derived, creaturely approximations of the absolute righteousness of the God in whose image we are made and whose moral character is the ultimate reference point for all moral discourse.

The Hebrew word *tsedaqah* and its cognates appear over 500 times in the Old Testament, pervading the vocabulary of law, covenant, worship, and prophecy. It carries connotations of straightness, conformity to the standard, being what one ought to be in relation to the norm that applies to one. Applied to God, it describes His absolute, unwavering, perfectly consistent conformity to the only standard that matters: His own holy character. The Greek *dikaiosynē* of the New Testament carries the same range of meaning, and its cognate verb *dikaioo* ("to justify") is the term that will occupy us at length in Section V of this lesson, where the problem of justification becomes the ground of the gospel's most magnificent resolution.

II. Defining Justice: God's Righteous Governance in Rewarding Good and Punishing Evil

If righteousness describes what God is in His moral character, justice describes what God does in His governance of the universe as the expression of that character. The Hebrew *mishpat*, from the root *shaphat*, to judge, to govern, to rule, encompasses the full range of divine activity in which the moral order of creation is administered: the acquittal of the innocent, the punishment of the guilty, the vindication of the oppressed, the restraint of the wicked, and the ultimate ordering of all things according to the perfect moral standard that is God's own character.

Psalm 89:14 provides one of the most majestic and most theologically compact declarations of justice as the foundation of God's governance:

"Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You.", Psalm 89:14, NASB 1995

The image is architectural and political: the throne of God, the seat of His sovereign rule over the universe, is founded upon righteousness and justice. These are not occasional features of His governance, not policies that He sometimes applies when He is in the right mood; they are the very foundation upon which His rule rests. The governance of the universe is not arbitrary, not capricious, not subject to the whims of a powerful being who could decide to administer things differently on a given day. It is founded upon righteousness and justice, upon the absolutely reliable, perfectly consistent, morally serious administration of the moral order in a manner that fully reflects the character of the God who governs it.

The theological tradition has distinguished two forms of divine justice that together constitute the comprehensive scope of God's judicial governance: remunerative justice and retributive justice.

A. Remunerative Justice: Rewarding Obedience

Remunerative justice is God's righteous governance in rewarding the good, in recognizing, affirming, and appropriately honoring the obedience and faithfulness of His creatures. This dimension of divine justice is often underemphasized in a theological culture preoccupied with the other dimension, but it is no less real and no less important. The Psalms are full of the expectation that the righteous will be rewarded: "For the LORD loves justice and does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever, but the descendants of the wicked will be cut off" (Psalm 37:28, NASB 1995). The New Testament speaks of crowns of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8), crowns of life (James 1:12; Revelation 2:10), and rewards for faithful service (Matthew 25:21; 1 Corinthians 3:14).

The ground of remunerative justice is not human merit in the absolute sense, as if any creature could establish a claim upon God based on unaided moral performance, but the covenantal faithfulness that God honors in accordance with His own righteous covenant commitments. The promise that the faithful servant will be rewarded is not a divine concession to human self-interest; it is the righteous expression of the God who keeps His word, who does not overlook faithful service, and who has committed Himself to honoring those who honor Him (1 Samuel 2:30).

B. Retributive Justice: Punishing Sin

Retributive justice is God's righteous governance in punishing evil, in holding the morally guilty accountable for their offenses against the divine character and the divine order, and in administering the punishment that the moral law requires. This is the dimension of divine justice that generates the most theological and pastoral controversy, because it stands in apparent tension with the love and mercy of God, and because it generates the problem of justification that we will press in Section V.

The scriptural basis for divine retributive justice is pervasive and unambiguous. "For He will render to every man according to his deeds" (Romans 2:6, NASB 1995). "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10, NASB 1995). "For God will bring every act to judgment,

everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14, NASB 1995). The moral universe is not one in which sin ultimately goes unpunished, in which the wicked escape consequence, and in which moral actions are without moral consequences. It is a universe administered by the righteous God whose character guarantees that every moral act will be met with its appropriate moral response.

The retributive justice of God is not the vindictiveness of a capricious tyrant; it is the expression of the holy character of the God who is morally incapable of treating sin as though it were not sin. It is what makes the moral universe morally serious, what gives weight and consequence to human moral choices, and what grounds the human intuition that wickedness deserves punishment and that the unpunished survival of the wicked is a wound in the fabric of moral reality. The prophet Habakkuk felt this intuition with anguished intensity; the whole of his prophecy is the cry of a soul that cannot reconcile the justice of God with the apparent prosperity of evil and the suffering of the righteous. And the answer he receives is not a philosophical resolution but a prophetic assurance: “The righteous will live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4, NASB 1995), the justice of God will prevail, in God’s time and by God’s means, and the one who trusts that justice will not be put to shame.

III. God as the Judge of All the Earth: Abraham’s Searching Question

The most searching and most theologically freighted question about divine justice in all of Scripture is the question Abraham poses to the LORD in the context of the impending destruction of Sodom:

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”, Genesis 18:25, NASB 1995

The question is remarkable in several respects. First, it is a question posed to God, about God, by a man who trusts God, an expression not of unbelief but of faith seeking understanding. Abraham does not doubt that God will do what is right; he is pressing the implications of his certainty about divine justice into a specific and troubling circumstance. Second, the question assumes and declares the most comprehensive possible scope of divine jurisdiction: God is “the Judge of all the earth.” Not the judge of Israel, not the judge of Abraham’s family, not the judge of those who worship Him, the Judge of all the earth, every human being who has ever lived, every act that has ever been performed, every intention that has ever been formed, without exception and without remainder.

Third, the question implies a standard that God’s own justice is accountable to, and that standard, as we established in Section I, is God’s own righteous character. The question “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” is not a challenge to God’s authority but a confident appeal to God’s character: the character that Abraham has come to know in the covenant relationship, the character that defines what justice means, the character from which no deviation is possible because the character is the standard. Abraham’s question is actually a form of prayer grounded in the knowledge of the divine character: I know You. I know that You are just. Therefore, I know that You will not treat the righteous and the wicked alike. Act according to who You are.

The declaration of God as the Judge of all the earth is the theological ground of all Christian confidence in the final resolution of history. The evil that seems to triumph, the wickedness that seems to go unpunished, the suffering of the innocent that seems to mock any claim to cosmic moral order, all of it stands under the jurisdiction of the Judge of all the earth, who has set a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed (Acts 17:31). The patience of God in the present age, His apparent delay in executing final judgment, is not moral indifference or judicial failure; it is the patience of the righteous Judge who gives space for repentance (Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9) before the day of final and comprehensive reckoning.

IV. The Central Problem: How Can a Just God Justify Sinners?

Having established the righteousness and justice of God, His absolute moral rectitude and His perfectly consistent governance of the moral order, we arrive at what is, arguably, the central theological problem of the entire New Testament: the problem of justification. The problem may be stated simply: if God is perfectly righteous, and if His retributive justice demands that sin be punished, and if every human being is a sinner, then how can God ever declare a human being righteous? How can the righteous Judge of all the earth acquit the guilty? If He simply overlooks sin, He compromises His justice. If He simply punishes sin, He condemns every sinner. How can He be simultaneously just and the justifier of those who have faith?

This is precisely the question that Paul presses in Romans 3:26, one of the most theologically dense and most gospel-saturated verses in all of Scripture. The full passage of Romans 3:21–26 must be quoted and attended to with the greatest possible care:

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”, Romans 3:21–26, NASB 1995

This passage is the theological heart of the entire letter to the Romans, and, one might argue, of the entire New Testament. It addresses the problem of justification head-on, and it does so not by dissolving the tension between divine justice and divine mercy but by resolving it in the only way that is adequate to both: through the propitiation of Christ.

Notice Paul’s precise language: God displayed Christ “as a propitiation in His blood” (v. 25), and He did so “to demonstrate His righteousness” (v. 25), His justice, “so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (v. 26). The cross is not the setting aside of divine justice in favor of divine mercy; it is the simultaneous satisfaction of both. God is just, the full weight of His retributive justice against the sins of every believer has been borne by Christ, the substitute. And God is the justifier, the

guilty sinner who has faith in Christ is declared righteous, not because the guilt has been overlooked, but because the penalty has been paid. Justice is not compromised; it is satisfied. Mercy is not cheap; it is paid for at infinite cost.

V. The Propitiation of Christ: Justice and Mercy Meet Without Compromise

The word propitiation, Greek *hilastērion*, used in Romans 3:25 and translated “propitiation” or “means of atonement”, is one of the most important and most contested words in the New Testament vocabulary of the atonement. To understand what it means is to understand the gospel in its most precise and most glorious form.

Propitiation, in its classical definition, is the appeasement of wrath through the offering of a sacrifice. It is to be distinguished from expiation, which is the removal of sin’s guilt and defilement, though the two concepts are closely related. Expiation focuses on the removal of the problem (sin); propitiation focuses on the satisfaction of the offended party (God in His just wrath). The distinction matters enormously, because some modern translations of the New Testament have rendered *hilastērion* as “means of atonement” or “sacrifice of atonement”, translations that are not wrong but that fail to capture the specific dimension of wrath-satisfaction that the term carries in its classical Greek usage and in the Septuagint tradition.

The biblical case for propitiation as the proper translation is secured by two lines of evidence. First, Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–3:20 has established the universal reality of divine wrath (Romans 1:18: “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”) as the fundamental problem to which the gospel responds. When Paul arrives at Romans 3:25 and declares that God presented Christ as a *hilastērion*, the problem he has been describing for three chapters is not merely the guilt of sin (which expiation would address) but the wrath of God against sin (which requires propitiation). Second, the Old Testament background of the term, *hilastērion* is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew *kappōret*, the mercy seat, the cover of the ark of the covenant, upon which the blood of atonement was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement, is explicitly the place where wrath is turned away through blood, where the covenant God meets His people in grace because the penalty of their sins has been covered.

The pastoral and theological significance of propitiation is immense. It means that the cross is not merely a display of divine love (though it is supremely that); it is also the satisfaction of divine justice. God did not forgive sin by overlooking it or by reducing the moral demand that His righteousness makes; He forgave sin by meeting that demand fully, in the Person of His Son, who bore the wrath that our sin deserved. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1, NASB 1995), not because condemnation is no longer deserved, but because condemnation has already been executed on the One who stood in our place. The cross is the place where divine justice and divine mercy meet without compromise: justice, because sin is not forgiven without punishment; mercy, because the punishment is borne by God Himself in the Person of His Son, not by the sinner who deserved it.

The psalmist's declaration in Psalm 89:14 takes on its deepest meaning in the light of the cross: "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You." The lovingkindness (*hesed*) that goes before the divine throne is not a lovingkindness that rides over and suppresses the righteousness and justice upon which the throne is founded; it is a lovingkindness that the cross has demonstrated to be fully consistent with, indeed, to be the supreme expression of, the righteousness and justice that make God's governance reliable. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16, NASB 1995), and the giving was the meeting of every demand that the righteousness and justice of God make upon a world of sinners.

VI. The Eschatological Dimension: The Final Judgment as the Vindication of Divine Justice

The righteousness and justice of God are not only vindicated in the cross of Jesus Christ, where the sins of the redeemed are dealt with in the most definitive and permanent way possible. They are also directed toward a future and final vindication that is the consummation of all that the cross began: the final judgment, the great day of reckoning at which the Judge of all the earth will administer a comprehensive, perfect, and irresistible justice over the whole of human history.

Second Thessalonians 1:6–8 provides one of the most direct and most sober New Testament declarations of the eschatological dimension of divine justice:

"For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.", 2 Thessalonians 1:6–8, NASB 1995

The passage is unsparing in its declaration of divine retributive justice at the eschatological level. The judgment that falls upon those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel is not an arbitrary punishment; Paul describes it as what is "only just" (*dikaion*), the righteous, morally necessary response of the just God to the persistent, willful rejection of His gracious self-revelation. The language of "retribution" ("dealing out retribution," Greek *diken tino*) carries the sense of rendering what is legally and morally due, paying out the penalty that justice requires.

The eschatological justice of God is the hope of those who suffer unjustly in the present age, the persecuted church, the oppressed poor, the victims of injustice who have seen no human remedy for their plight. The cry of the martyrs in Revelation 6:10, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?", is not a cry of vindictiveness but a cry for justice: the same justice that Abraham appealed to in Genesis 18:25, the same justice that Habakkuk agonized over, the same justice that Paul declares will be universally and irresistibly administered at the appearing of the Lord Jesus.

The eschatological justice of God also provides the theological ground for the church's restraint in the pursuit of personal vengeance. Paul's injunction in Romans 12:19,

“Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (NASB 1995), is grounded precisely in the certainty of divine justice. The reason we do not need to take vengeance is not that injustice does not matter or that wrongdoers will not be held accountable; it is that the Judge of all the earth will deal justly, comprehensively, and finally with every wrong that has ever been done, and we can leave it in His hands.

VII. The Pastoral Significance: Justice as the Ground of Hope, Gospel, and Peace

The righteousness and justice of God are not merely doctrines to be defended against the charge that a God of love could not also be a God of justice. They are living, transforming, hope-producing realities that address some of the deepest needs of the human soul. Let us close Lesson 15 by pressing the pastoral significance of these attributes into three dimensions.

A. Justice as the Ground of Hope for the Suffering

For those who suffer unjustly, for those who have been wronged, oppressed, abused, or forgotten by human systems of justice, the righteousness and justice of God are not theological abstractions but lifelines. The Judge of all the earth will deal justly. Every wrong that has been done in secret will be brought into the light. Every oppressor who has escaped human accountability will answer before the One who misses nothing and forgets nothing. Every tear of the innocent that has fallen without human comfort will be seen by the God whose eyes are too pure to approve evil and who will not leave the guilty unpunished.

This is not the vindictiveness of the embittered; it is the faith of those who know the character of the Judge. The righteousness of God is the only ground upon which the suffering of the righteous in the present age can be endured with composure. The Psalms of lament, where the psalmist brings his experience of injustice before the holy and righteous God and cries for vindication, are the model of this faith: not passive resignation to injustice, not bitter demand for immediate retribution, but the confident petition of the one who knows the character of the Judge and trusts that the Judge will act. “The LORD is known by the judgment which He executes; the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands” (Psalm 9:16, NASB 1995).

B. Justice as the Ground of the Gospel

For the sinner who stands under the condemnation of God’s righteous law, the justice of God is not, at first, good news, it is the devastating diagnosis of a condition that cannot be remedied by human effort. The full weight of divine retributive justice bearing upon the sinner’s record is what makes the gospel not merely welcome but necessary: because the sinner cannot remove the debt that justice requires, only the God who is just can provide the satisfaction that His own justice demands.

And this is precisely what the gospel announces: that the just God, in the Person of His Son, has satisfied His own justice on behalf of those who have faith in Christ. The word of Romans 3:26, “just and the justifier”, is the most compressed and most glorious

declaration of the gospel available in the whole of Scripture. Just: the divine justice is fully, completely, and permanently satisfied in the cross of Christ. Justifier: the guilty sinner, in union with Christ by faith, is declared righteous before the court of heaven on the basis of that satisfaction. This is not fiction; it is the most real thing in the universe. The Judge of all the earth has pronounced the believing sinner “not guilty”, and the verdict is grounded in the righteousness of the Son who stood in the sinner’s place.

C. Justice as the Ground of Peace

For the believer who struggles with assurance, who wonders whether the record of sin and failure that accuses the conscience in quiet moments can really be forgiven and forgotten, the justice of God is the most secure possible ground of peace. The assurance of the believer does not rest on the quality of his own repentance, the consistency of his own obedience, or the depth of his own spiritual feelings; it rests on the righteousness of the One who has already borne the full weight of divine justice on the believer’s behalf, and whose sacrifice the just God has accepted as fully satisfying every claim His righteousness makes.

The hymn-writers have expressed this truth with a clarity that theology sometimes struggles to match. Augustus Toplady’s “Rock of Ages” captures the double movement of divine justice perfectly: “Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law’s demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; Thou must save, and Thou alone.” And the ground of that salvation is the very justice that seemed to forbid it: God is just, He cannot overlook sin, and precisely because He cannot overlook sin, He provided in Christ the substitute who bore it fully, so that the believer’s peace does not rest on the fragile foundation of human religious performance but on the immovable rock of divine justice satisfied.

Key Texts (NASB 1995)

Genesis 18:25

“Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

Psalms 89:14

“Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You.”

Romans 3:21–26

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned

and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

2 Thessalonians 1:6–8

“For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Righteousness (Tsedaqāh / Dikaiosynē)	Hebrew tsedaqāh (תְּצַדִּיק) and Greek dikaiosynē: God’s perfect moral rectitude, His absolute conformity to the highest possible moral standard, which is identical with His own nature. God’s righteousness is not His conformity to an external law; it is His perfect self-consistency in accordance with His own holy character, which is itself the ultimate ground and definition of all that is morally right.
Justice (Mishpāt)	Hebrew mishpāt (מִשְׁפָּט), from shapāt (to judge, govern, rule). God’s expression of righteousness in His governance of the universe: His righteous administration of the moral order in a manner that rewards obedience and punishes sin. Declared to be the very foundation of God’s throne in Psalm 89:14. Encompasses both remunerative justice (rewarding the good) and retributive justice (punishing evil).
Remunerative Justice	The dimension of divine justice that consists in rewarding obedience, faithfulness, and goodness. God honors those who honor Him (1 Samuel 2:30), rewards faithful service (Matthew 25:21), and has established in the covenant relationship the promise of blessing for obedience. Not based on absolute human merit (all human righteousness is derived), but on God’s righteous covenant faithfulness to His own covenantal promises.
Retributive Justice	The dimension of divine justice that consists in punishing sin and holding the morally guilty accountable for their offenses against the divine character. The moral universe is not one in which sin ultimately goes unpunished; it is governed by the righteous God whose character requires that every moral offense receive its

Propitiation (Hilastērion)	appropriate moral response. The ground of the problem of justification: how can the just God acquit the guilty? Greek hilastērion (ἱλαστήριον): the appeasement of wrath through the offering of a sacrifice. Used in Romans 3:25 to describe the atoning work of Christ. Distinguished from expiation (the removal of sin's guilt) by its focus on the satisfaction of the offended party (God in His just wrath). The propitiation of Christ means that God's righteous wrath against the sins of believers has been fully satisfied in the cross, so that God can be simultaneously just and the justifier of those who have faith.
Expiation	The removal of the guilt and defilement of sin through sacrifice. Distinguished from propitiation by its focus on the objective (sin and its guilt) rather than the subject (God and His wrath). Both aspects of the atonement are present in the New Testament: expiation (the sin is removed and forgiven) and propitiation (the wrath it incurred is fully satisfied). The two together constitute the comprehensive scope of what Christ accomplished at the cross.
Justification (Dikaiosis / Dikaioō)	From Greek dikaioō ("to justify," "to declare righteous"). In Paul's theology, justification is the forensic act of God by which He declares the believing sinner righteous before His judicial bar on the basis of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Not an infusion of righteousness into the believer (that is sanctification) but a declaration about the believer's legal standing. Romans 3:26: God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."
Imputation	The legal act of crediting to someone's account what is not inherently theirs. In the doctrine of justification: the imputation of Adam's sin to all humanity (Romans 5:12–19), the imputation of the believer's sin to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:6), and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer (Romans 5:17–19; Philippians 3:9). The double imputation is the doctrinal core of the substitutionary atonement and the ground of the believer's justification.
Kappōret (כַּפֹּרֶת)	Hebrew for the mercy seat or atonement cover, the cover of the ark of the covenant, upon which the high priest sprinkled the blood of atonement on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:14–15). Translated hilastērion in the Septuagint, the same word used for Christ in Romans 3:25. The mercy seat was the place where God's wrath against Israel's sin was turned away through blood, foreshadowing the propitiation accomplished by Christ on the cross.
Double Imputation	The theological formulation that the atonement involves two imputations moving in opposite directions: the believer's sin is imputed to Christ ("He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf," 2 Corinthians 5:21), and Christ's righteousness is imputed to the believer ("so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him," 2 Corinthians 5:21). This double exchange is the heart of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone and the most

	complete resolution of the problem of how a just God can justify sinners.
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Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that God's righteousness is not His conformity to an external moral code but His perfect self-consistency with His own holy nature, which is the ultimate ground and definition of all moral reality. We must believe that His justice is not capricious or arbitrary but the absolutely reliable, perfectly consistent expression of that righteous character in the governance of the universe. We must believe that the problem of justification, how a just God can declare a sinner righteous, is answered not by the relaxation of divine justice but by its full satisfaction in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. And we must believe that the same justice that seems to threaten the sinner is, in Christ, the very ground of the sinner's hope: God is just, and precisely because He is just, the cross of Christ provides a standing before Him that no future sin and no subsequent failure can undermine.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The righteousness and justice of God should produce in us a profound gratitude for the cross that we cannot adequately feel until we have genuinely felt the weight of what the cross absorbed. The person who knows that God is perfectly righteous and that His retributive justice is perfectly certain, who has stood, even for a moment, before the bar of the divine righteousness and felt the weight of its verdict on his own record, is the person who will never hear the declaration "just and the justifier" with anything less than trembling, grateful astonishment. Let the righteousness of God press upon your conscience until the cross is not a familiar religious symbol but the most urgent and most necessary event in the history of the universe.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

1. **Preach and teach justification by faith alone with precision and confidence.** Romans 3:21–26 is the most important passage in the New Testament on justification, and its specific connection of justification to the propitiation of Christ is the most important theological connection in the whole of Paul's theology. Know this passage. Know what it means that God is "just and the justifier." Know the difference between propitiation and expiation, between imputation and impartation, between justification and sanctification. These distinctions are not pedantry; they are the grammar of the gospel.
2. **Rest your assurance in the justice of God, not the quality of your repentance.** The most secure ground of Christian assurance is not the depth of the believer's sorrow over sin or the quality of his religious performance; it is the righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer and the justice of God already fully satisfied at the cross. When the conscience accuses, the answer is not "I am

repentant enough” or “I have performed well enough”; the answer is Romans 8:1: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because the condemnation has already been executed on the One who stood in my place.

3. **Use the justice of God as the ground of hope for those who suffer injustice.** When you minister to those who have been wronged, oppressed, or victimized by injustice, when human remedies have failed and the perpetrators of evil seem to prosper, bring the righteousness and justice of God to bear as a living pastoral resource. The Judge of all the earth will deal justly. Every wrong will be addressed. No victim has been forgotten by the God who knows all things and whose justice is the foundation of His throne. Leave room for the wrath of God (Romans 12:19); He will repay.
4. **Resist the cultural pressure to separate love from justice in God’s character.** The dominant religious culture of our time has constructed a god who is all love and no justice, a deity who accepts everyone without condition, judges no one, and finds sin either endearing or irrelevant. This is not the God of Scripture. The God of Scripture is both perfectly loving and perfectly just, and the cross of Christ is the proof that these attributes are not in competition. Do not apologize for the justice of God; preach it, in all its moral seriousness, as the attribute that makes the love of God glorious rather than sentimental.
5. **Pray through the eschatological justice of God with your congregation.** Second Thessalonians 1:6–8 is a pastoral letter from Paul to a suffering congregation, and its declaration of eschatological justice is not a threat but a comfort: it is “only just” that God will repay those who afflict His people, and “relief” is coming when the Lord Jesus is revealed. Teach your congregation to live in the light of this future reality, to endure present injustice with the patient confidence of those who know that the Judge of all the earth will deal justly, and to make room in their prayers for both the suffering church and the eschatological justice that will vindicate it.

D. For Every Season of Life

For the new believer: The doctrine of justification by faith alone, the declaration that God is simultaneously just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus, is the single most important thing you can understand about what happened to you in your conversion. You were not merely forgiven in the sense that your sin was overlooked; you were justified in the sense that the divine justice that your sin deserved has been fully satisfied in Christ, and His righteousness has been credited to your account. Your standing before God is not based on your spiritual performance; it is based on the immovable foundation of Christ’s propitiation.

For the one who has been wronged and who sees no human remedy: The justice of God is your hope. Abraham’s question is your prayer: Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? The answer is yes, absolutely, perfectly, finally, and comprehensively yes. The injustice you have suffered has not escaped His notice, has not been overlooked by His justice, and will not be left unaddressed by His final governance. Leave room for the wrath of God. He will repay.

For the one burdened by guilt: The guilt that weighs on your conscience is a testimony to your knowledge of God's righteousness, the moral reality written on your heart that your deeds have fallen short of the standard of the holy, righteous God. Do not dismiss that guilt; it is the voice of the conscience bearing witness to a moral reality that is real. But bring it to the cross, where the wrath that your guilt deserves has already been borne by the Son of God, and where the Judge of all the earth has pronounced, on the basis of Christ's righteousness imputed to the believing sinner, the most liberating verdict in the history of the universe: not guilty.

For the pastor and teacher: The righteousness and justice of God, properly understood and faithfully proclaimed, are the attributes that give the gospel its moral seriousness and its glorious necessity. A church that does not know the justice of God will not treasure the cross as it ought; a church that does not treasure the cross will not be transformed by it. Preach the justice of God without apology, and then preach the propitiation of Christ with the full weight of what it means: that the just God has become the justifier, not by setting aside His justice but by satisfying it in the most magnificent act of sovereign grace in the history of the universe.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

1. Think of a situation, in your own life, in the news, or in history, where justice was not served: where the guilty went unpunished, the innocent suffered, or the powerful exploited the weak without accountability. How did that experience of injustice affect you emotionally and spiritually? How does the doctrine of the justice of God address that experience?

Observation Questions (What Does the Text Say?)

2. Read Genesis 18:22–33. What is the context of Abraham's appeal to the justice of God? What does the phrase "Judge of all the earth" declare about the scope of God's judicial authority? What does Abraham's repeated petition reveal about the relationship between divine justice and divine mercy? What does God's patient engagement with Abraham's prayer reveal about His character?

3. Read Romans 3:21–26 slowly and carefully. Identify every key term: righteousness of God, faith, justified, grace, redemption, Christ Jesus, propitiation, blood, demonstration, forbearance, just, justifier. How does the structure of verses 25–26 specifically address the problem of how God can be both just and the justifier? What does the phrase "demonstration of His righteousness" mean in the context of Paul's argument?

4. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:3–8. What is the pastoral situation Paul is addressing? Why does he invoke the justice of God as a comfort to the suffering Thessalonians? What does verse 6 mean when it says it is "only just" for God to repay their afflictors? How does the eschatological justice of God function as a pastoral resource for the persecuted church?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

5. Explain the distinction between remunerative justice and retributive justice. Why are both necessary for a complete account of divine justice? How does the covenant relationship provide the proper framework for understanding remunerative justice without implying that God owes anything to any creature on the basis of unaided human merit?
6. What is the difference between propitiation and expiation? Why does the distinction matter for understanding the atonement? How does the Old Testament background of hilastērion (the kappōret / mercy seat of Leviticus 16) illuminate the meaning of Romans 3:25?
7. Explain the doctrine of double imputation. How do 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 5:17–19 together express the two directions of the imputation? Why is the double imputation the most complete resolution of the problem stated in Romans 3:26 (“just and the justifier”)?
8. Psalm 89:14 declares that “righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You.” How does the cross of Christ demonstrate that lovingkindness and justice are not in competition but are simultaneous expressions of the same divine character? How does the cross vindicate rather than compromise divine justice?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

9. Romans 3:26 declares that God is “just and the justifier.” Is this declaration currently functioning as the primary ground of your assurance before God, or are you unconsciously grounding your assurance in your own spiritual performance, consistency, or emotional experience? What does it mean to rest your standing before God entirely on the justice already satisfied in Christ?
10. Romans 12:19 instructs believers never to take personal vengeance but to “leave room for the wrath of God.” Is there a relationship in your life, a wrong done to you, an injustice not yet addressed, where you are struggling to leave room for God’s justice rather than pursuing your own? How does the certainty of divine eschatological justice change the way you relate to present injustice?
11. The lesson argues that a church that does not know the justice of God will not treasure the cross as it ought. In what ways might a diminished or distorted understanding of divine justice lead to a shallow or sentimental understanding of the gospel? How does the full weight of divine righteousness make the declaration “just and the justifier” not merely good news but the most necessary and most glorious news in the universe?
12. Abraham’s question in Genesis 18:25, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”, is both a theological declaration and a pastoral prayer. In what specific area of your life, a personal suffering, a social injustice, a historical evil, do you most need to pray this prayer today? What does it mean to commit that situation to the righteous governance of the Judge of all the earth?

Prayer Focus

Open your prayer with the declaration of Psalm 89:14: Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You. Acknowledge before God that His governance of the universe is absolutely reliable, absolutely righteous, and absolutely just, that the foundation upon which all things rest is not the shifting sand of human moral consensus or the compromised justice of fallen human courts, but the righteousness of the God whose character is the ultimate standard of all that is right.

Then pray the question of Abraham: Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? Bring before the righteous Judge the specific injustices that burden your heart, the personal wrongs that have not been addressed, the social evils that seem to triumph, the suffering of the innocent that seems to have no remedy. Leave them there. Leave room for the wrath of God. He will repay. He will deal justly. Every wrong will be addressed by the One who misses nothing and forgets nothing and whose justice is the very foundation of His throne.

And then close by resting in the declaration of Romans 3:26: God is just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Thank Him for the cross, where His justice was satisfied and your guilt was borne by the One who knew no sin. Thank Him that He did not have to choose between His righteousness and your forgiveness, that in the cross He was simultaneously perfectly just and perfectly merciful, and that the verdict “not guilty” that He pronounced over you in Christ is grounded in the most immovable foundation in the universe: the justice of the God who is always, unfailingly, perfectly right.

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com