

Nature and Character of God

What Is God Like?

October 06, 2019

I. God is the judge

A. Last Sunday, we took our first look at the nature and character of God as seen through His being the Judge of the earth and all mankind.

1. The first truth I tried to convey is that God does not judge anyone from a distance or in an unemotional, unfeeling, insensitive, indifferent, or hard-hearted way.
 - a. Rather, when God is judging right from wrong, obedience from disobedience, and the righteous from the unrighteous, He judges as a father who is as personally involved in the lives of His children as a father can be and as much as His children will allow Him to be.
 - b. The reason I started with this truth is because God's role as Judge is a complex role that includes all the various aspects of His nature and character and takes into account all His desires for the world and each individual in the world. This means that each and every judgment is influenced by who God is in His totality rather than by simple, black or white justice.
 - c. And I believe this is important because it is as we take into account this complexity that we are able to see God's justice more nearly as it really is – justice that is good and perfect and acceptable.
 - d. Following that, we looked at the fact that God judges us according to our deeds, and that He is completely impartial.
2. Today, we are going to look at God's nature and character as a Judge through a portion of scripture in the OT, which, in my opinion, provides a clear and detailed description of God's justice in dealing with us.

B. Pray

II. God's nature and character as seen through His being our Judge.

A. In the book of **Ezekiel**, there are two chapters in which God gives us a clear and detailed picture of His nature and character as revealed through His mindset and actions when judging sinners and the righteous. The first portion is found in **Ezekiel 18:1-32** (*the entire chapter*), and the second portion is in **Ezekiel 33:12-20**.

1. Though these two portions of scripture contain essentially the same message, **Ezekiel 18** contains what we might call the unabridged or more complete explanation while **Ezekiel 33** contains a shorter, more compact explanation.
2. Now I want to acknowledge that Ezekiel is in the OT, which means it was written before the time of Christ and before Paul wrote his epistles. However, in my opinion, these two portions of scripture are a rich resource of information about the nature and character of God in regard to His justice.
3. Therefore, I am going to read through **Ezekiel 18:1-32**, and make comments along the way.

B. **Ezekiel 18:1-32** . . . Then the word of the LORD came to me (*Ezekiel*), saying, [2] "What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, '**The fathers eat the sour grapes, but the children's teeth are set on edge**'? [3] "As I live," declares the Lord God, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. [4] Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die."

1. The theology of the day was that God's punishment for the father's sins would fall upon his children.
 - a. Now it isn't as the theologians of the day made this up on their own. God clearly said in **Exodus 34:7** that He would visit the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.
 - b. And this same truth is stated in **Exodus 20:5**, **Numbers 14:18**, and **Deuteronomy 5:9**.
2. However, like some of our theology today, the theologians got it wrong, so God is correcting their theology. And in essence, God is saying that each sinner will be held accountable for his own sin, even though it is also true that future generations will bear some of the resulting consequences of their forefathers sin.
3. From here, God goes on to give a clear and detailed explanation of what He means.

C. [5] "But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness, [6] and does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period— [7] [and] if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit

robbery, but gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, [8] if he does not lend money on interest or take increase, if he keeps his hand from iniquity and executes true justice between man and man, [9] (*now notice, after saying all that, God makes sure nothing is overlooked by saying*) [and] **if he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully** (*that is, if he faithfully lives according to My statutes and ordinances*)—he is righteous and will surely live," declares the Lord GOD.

1. Just a couple of comments for clarification –
 2. In **vs 7**, to restore to the debtor his pledge is to return his collateral so the borrower does not have to be without his collateral when he legitimately needs it. An example of this is found in **Deuteronomy 24:10-13**, "When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not enter his house to take his pledge. [11] You shall remain outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. [12] If he is a poor man, you shall not sleep with his pledge. [13] When the sun goes down you shall surely return the pledge to him, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it will be righteousness for you before the LORD your God."
 3. In **vs 8**, the law forbid Jews from charging interest on money loaned to a fellow Jew. But in situations where they could charge interest, it could not exceed the legal limit or the culturally accepted limit.
 4. Therefore, to **take increase** or **usury**, as some Bibles say it, is to charge an interest rate above the legal or culturally accepted amount, and in so doing, oppress the poor with excessive interest rates or take advantage of those who could pay such high rates.
 5. Finally, all the requirements (*God's laws*) for righteous living stated in **vs 5-9** come out of God's nature and character, and are practical expressions of His second great commandment – which states that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is why Paul says in **Romans 13:10**, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."
- D. [10] "Then he may have a violent son who sheds blood and who does any of these things to a brother [11] (though he (*the father*) did not do any of these things), that is, he (*the son*) even eats at the mountain shrines, and defiles his neighbor's wife, [12] oppresses the poor and needy, commits robbery, does not restore a pledge, but lifts up his eyes to the idols and commits abomination, [13] he lends money on interest and takes increase; **will he live? He will not live!** He has committed all

these abominations, he will surely be put to death; his blood will be on his own head (*in other words, he did this to himself*)."

1. To gain a proper understanding what God is saying here, we need additional information.

a. The additional information needed is found in the rest of this chapter, for it is in the rest of the chapter that we see that God is not talking about sinning once or twice or three times, but rather living a life, or at least the rest of one's life **devoted to** selfishness and sin – which in essence means intentionally, repeatedly, and unrepentantly rebelling against God and living contrary to His will and word.

b. We get confirmation of this understanding in **1 John 3:9**. But to keep this verse in its context, I will read **1 John 3:7-9**, "Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who **practices righteousness** is righteous, just as He is righteous; [8] the one who **practices sin** is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. [9] No one who is born of God **practices sin**, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.

2. The important truth here is that God is talking about a sinner who willfully continues to knowingly and willingly sin (*or as John says it, practices sin*), without coming to his senses and repenting, to the end of his life. In other words, the one who doesn't want to repent and doesn't want to change his ways will receive the due consequences of his choices.

E. [14] "Now behold, he has a son who has observed all his father's sins which he committed, and observing does not do likewise. [15] He does not eat at the mountain shrines or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife, [16] or oppress anyone, or retain a pledge, or commit robbery, but he gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, [17] he keeps his hand from the poor (*that is, he does not oppress or take advantage of the poor when he has the opportunity to do so without anyone finding out*), does not take interest or increase, but executes My ordinances, and walks in My statutes; **he will not die for his father's iniquity**, he will surely live. [18] As for his father, because he practiced extortion, robbed his brother and did what was not good among his people, behold, he will die for his iniquity."

1. There is a truth here that is discounted by many in our world, and maybe even by some in this room.
2. This truth is simple: Regardless of the home you are raised in, or the kind of parents you have, or the culture you grow up in, you can break the cycle of foolish, sinful, selfish, self-destructive living by turning to God – and with His empowerment and truth, you can become a new creation in Christ Jesus who, therefore, is able to move forward in living a life pleasing to God.
3. In other words, though many allow the evil or hurtful or irrational or destructive influences in their past to control them or at least strongly influence them, it is not in God's nature or character to enslave anyone to their past. God's way is to make it possible for us to break free of our past and become new creatures in Christ Jesus. Therefore, if anything holds us back, it is not our past, but our own chosen way of dealing with our past which we are unwilling to let go of.

F. **[19a]** "Yet you say, 'Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity?'"

1. Here again, we see the power of the theology of the day, a power that feeds the belief that since it is the popular theology it must be the correct theology. And since it is the correct theology, God must act accordingly. And if He doesn't, He is the one with the problem, not our theology.
2. Do you see the pride and possibly even arrogance in such thinking? And do you see how such thinking prompts us to read the Bible through the filter of our theology rather than test the accuracy of our theology through the filter of God's word?
3. The reality is, many miss seeing the true nature and character of God by holding to a bad or misleading theology?

G. **[19b]** "When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. [20] The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself."

1. Once again, God affirms that each person will bear responsibility for his or her chosen way of life, and only his own.

2. You see, it is not in God's nature or character to punish you for another person's sin. Therefore, even though these Jews thought their theology was right, it wasn't, and God goes on to explain why.
- H. [21] "But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. [22] All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he will live. [23] 'Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,' declares the Lord God, 'rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?'"
1. The **first** important truth in these verses is that no matter how sinful you have been, and no matter how long you have willfully lived in your sin, if you are still alive and mentally capable of repenting and changing your ways so as to live righteously, you can. And if you do, you will receive the gift of eternal life.
 2. Jesus confirms this truth in a parable about a man who lost one of his sheep. You can read the parable in **Luke 15:3-7**. But the statement within the parable that I want to read, is this, "**there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents** than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."
 3. The **second** important truth in these verses is that God takes no pleasure in sending unrepentant sinners to eternal damnation. In other words, it is not in God's nature or character to take pleasure in punishing the wicked.
 - a. I know that many think God is cruel and therefore defective, and they especially think this because He is going to send unrepentant sinners to hell for eternity.
 - b. However, though He is angry over all the needless suffering and destruction sinners have brought into this world and inflicted on these around them, He feels sadness over eternally damning them to hell. On the other hand, He feels great joy when sinners repent, trust in Jesus, and go forward to live a righteous life.
- I. [24] "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and does according to all the abominations that a wicked man does, will he live? All his righteous deeds which he has done will not be remembered for his treachery which he has committed and his sin which he has committed; for them he will die."

1. God said the same thing in a somewhat different way in **Ezekiel 33:13**, which says, “When I say to the righteous he will surely live, and he **SO** trusts in his righteousness that he commits iniquity, none of his righteous deeds will be remembered; but in that same iniquity of his which he has committed he will die.”
 2. Now remember, God is not talking about committing a sin or several sins or even lapsing into a pattern of sin – after which you repent and return to live godly.
 - a. God is talking about turning away from an intentional and faithful life of godliness to a persistent life of selfishness and sin, and remaining in that life until you die.
 - b. Could such a person repent again and return to faith in God and to living a godly life so that they still receive the gift of eternal life? Yes.
 - c. But that is not the case of the person God is speaking of in these verses. The person in these verses turns away from the way of God and does not repent so that he dies in that condition.
 3. Peter affirms this truth in **2 Peter 2:20-22**, “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. [21] For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. [22] It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.’”
- J. [25] "Yet you say, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Hear now, O house of Israel! Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right?"
1. Here in **vs 25**, God is affirming that the Jews are upset because He is not operating according to their theology, and therefore they are accusing Him of not playing fair.
 2. However, God puts the label of not playing fair back on them. And how were they being unfair? Simply stated, they did not want equal justice under the law.
 - a. You see, they wanted God to justify them in spite of living in sin until they died, but they didn't want God to justify the non-Jews who lived in sin until they died.
 - b. Sound a bit like Jonah, doesn't it? And maybe, it sounds a bit like some Christians today.

3. From here to the end of the chapter, God restates the essence of what He has said up to this point. And I believe that God does this to affirm the truth that regardless of what everyone around you believes or how they live, you can and ought to faithfully pursue living a godly life to the end of your days on the earth – and it is such as these whom God justifies and gives the gift of eternal life.
- K. [26] "When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity and dies because of it, for his iniquity which he has committed he will die. [27] Again, when a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life. [28] Because he considered and turned away from all his transgressions which he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. [29] But the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right? [30] Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord GOD. "Repent and turn away from **all** your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. [31] Cast away from you **all** your transgressions which you have committed and **make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!** For why will you die, O house of Israel? [32] For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."

III. Conclusion

- A. **John 3:16-17**, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. [17] For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."