

Doctrine of God Part 26-God as Lawgiver and Judge

Do you believe in Divine judgment? By which I mean, do you believe in a God who acts as our Judge? Many, it seems, do not. Speak to them of God as a Father, a friend, a helper, one who loves us despite all our weaknesses and folly and sin, and their faces light up; you are on their wavelength at once. But speak to them of God as Judge and they frown and shake their heads. Their minds recoil from such an idea. They find it repellent and unworthy. But there are few things stressed more strongly in the Bible than the reality of God's work as Judge. Paul refers to the fact that we must all appear before Christ's judgment seat as the terror of the Lord (2 Cor. 5:11), and well he might. Jesus the Lord, like His Father, is holy and pure; we are neither. We live under his eye, He knows our secrets, and on judgment day the whole of our past life will be brought under review. If we know ourselves at all, we know we are not fit to face Him. What then are we to do? The New Testament answer is: Call on the coming Judge to be your Savior. As Judge, He is the law, but as Savior He is the gospel. Run from Him now, and you will meet Him as Judge then and without hope. Seek Him now, and you will find Him, and you will then discover that you are looking forward to that future meeting with joy, knowing that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).

J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*

Having considered God as Lord, we will now consider His place over creation as Lawgiver and Judge. The Scriptures teach us that God is a holy, righteous, and loving Sovereign who cares for the well-being of His creation. It is right that such a Sovereign should rule over His creation and administer justice, rewarding the good that is done and punishing the evil. According to the Scriptures, God has revealed His will to all men and will judge all men according to the standard that has been revealed to them.

All creatures can be assured that God will judge them according to the strictest standards of justice and fairness. It must always be recognized that God's judgment of man is not unwarranted or cruel; rather, it is an inevitable consequence of His holy and righteous character and a necessary part of His government. A God who would forego judging wickedness would not be good or righteous. A creation where wickedness was not restrained and judged would soon self-destruct.

GOD THE LAWGIVER

The Scriptures teach us that the Creator and sovereign Lord of the universe is also its supreme Lawgiver and Judge. God has established the moral laws by which all men must live, and He holds them accountable for their obedience and disobedience. According to the Scriptures, man was not created to be **autonomous** or self-governed, but **theonomous**—under God's law.

As Lawgiver and Judge, God is both holy and righteous. The **holiness** of God refers to His separation from all that is common, profane, or sinful. The **righteousness** of God refers to the rightness and fairness of all His works and judgments. These attributes guarantee that God's law will always be appropriate or right and that His judgments will always be perfect. He will always do the right thing. On the day of His judgment, all men can be assured that God will judge them with perfect justice. Even the condemned will bow their heads and declare that the Judge of all the earth has judged them righteously.

In Isaiah 33:22, three very important offices are ascribed to God....Judge, Lawgiver and King. Each office communicates to us something about the person and work of God and about our relationship to Him...**Judge** means to decree, enact, or command something. God carved His law onto stone (Exodus 31:18) and onto the human heart (Romans 2:14-15). Heaven and earth will pass away before even the smallest letter of God's law will pass (Matthew 5:18), and it is by His law that all men will be judged.

God rules His kingdom according to His law, and He will judge the inhabitants of

His kingdom (i.e. every man) according to His law. God is King, Lawgiver, and Judge. All men have rebelled against the King, have broken His law, and stand condemned before His judgment seat. In order to be saved, we need a Priest to offer a sacrifice in our place, a Prophet to lead us out of our error into truth, and a King to pardon our offenses. All these offices are found in Christ alone—He is our Priest, Prophet, and King.

In James 4:12 is found an extremely important truth about God. This text not only affirms that God is both Lawgiver and Judge, but it also communicates the seriousness of the matter. The final judgment will determine the eternal destiny of all men. It is not to be taken lightly. On that final day, there will only be two possible verdicts: (1) eternal salvation in heaven or (2) eternal death and destruction in hell. If we take the laws and judgments of men with a high degree of seriousness, how much more should we be concerned for the law and judgments of God! Jesus gave us the following warning: “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

THE FOUNDATION OF GOD’S LAW

Why has God declared some things to be “right” and others to be “wrong”? Is God’s law nothing more than an arbitrary set of rules? Is there a reason behind all these commands and prohibitions? What is the true essence or heart of the law? These are very important questions. If we are to have a correct understanding of God’s law, we must give them careful consideration. The following statements are helpful.

1. **God is the self-existent Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of all.** It is right for God to rule over and judge all that He has made and sustains. It is right for Him to establish His laws and hold His creatures accountable to them.

2. **God is the only basis for morality.** Why are some things “good” and other things “evil”?

3. What is the basis for determining whether something is “right” or “wrong”? The Bible teaches that God is good. That which is like God (*i.e.* conforms to His character) is “good,” and that which is not like God (*i.e.* contradicts or opposes His character) is “evil.” Apart from God, there can be no laws, no right or wrong, and no standard of good or evil.
4. **God’s laws are an expression of who He is.** God’s laws are not arbitrary rules that He has capriciously chosen; they are a reflection of His character—His holiness, righteousness, benevolence, and so on. Sometimes, even Christians speak of the “law” as if it were some set of eternal and universal principles, independent of God and to which even God Himself is subject. However, this could not be further from the truth! It is God who established all laws, and the laws He has established are expressions of His very nature.

4. **The essence of God’s law is to love Him supremely and to love others as ourselves.** This is clearly taught by Jesus to be the heart and ultimate end to which all divine law is directed (Mark 12:29-31). The knowledge that we should love God supremely and others as ourselves is written on the heart of every man, and its full implications (*i.e.* what such love involves) are spelled out in clear and specific terms in the Scriptures (*e.g.* not worshiping idols, not stealing, not murdering, etc.).

THE LAW REVEALED IN THE SCRIPTURES

The law of God is made known to men through the Scriptures. In the pages of the Bible, we learn that men ought to love God supremely and love their fellow man as themselves. It is also through the Bible that the full implications of such love are spelled out in clear and specific terms: we love God by not worshiping idols, not stealing, not murdering, and so on (Exodus 20:1-17).

This written revelation of the law is unfolded with greater and greater clarity throughout the Bible, beginning in the book of Genesis and reaching its culmination in the New

Testament. From Genesis to Revelation, God's will is both revealed and illustrated. For this reason, the Apostle Paul wrote in II Timothy 3:16:

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."

Although God's revelation of His law in the Scriptures includes every portion of the Bible, God's will for human conduct was made known with special power and clarity on two occasions in Biblical history: (1) at the giving of the Old Covenant to Israel through Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 20:1-18), and (2) at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ—God's ultimate and final word to mankind (Hebrews 1:1-2).

THE LAW REVEALED IN THE HEART

God is the great Lawgiver who will judge every man according to His law, but this truth brings to mind a very important and troubling question: "How can God judge every man according to His law when a great multitude of humanity has never had the privilege of knowing the Scriptures that contain this law?"

According to the Scriptures, God has revealed His unchanging moral standard to mankind in two distinct ways: (1) He has revealed His will in great detail to **some men** through the written commands of Scripture, and (2) He has revealed His will to **all men** in a general way through the law that He has written on their hearts. In both cases, the revelation of God's law is sufficient so that all men without exception will be without excuse on the Day of Judgment. Those who have had the privilege of possessing the Scriptures will be judged according to the Scriptures, and those who have only had the influence of the law written upon their hearts will be judged according to that revelation of the law. Each man will be judged according to the light he has received. As the Scriptures declare in Luke 12:47-48:

"And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it,

and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.”

As noted above, because God is the supreme Lawgiver who will judge all men according to His law, we are forced to deal with a difficult question: “How can God judge every man according to His law when a great multitude of humanity has never had the privilege of knowing the Scriptures that contain this law?” In Romans 2:12, the answer to this problem is set before us with great clarity.

- *According to Romans 2:12, all mankind can be divided into two distinct groups.*
 - (1) Those who have sinned *W*_____ the Law. This refers specifically to the Gentiles or pagans outside of Israel who had no knowledge of the Old Covenant Law of God as revealed in the Pentateuch (*i.e.* the first five books of the Bible) through Moses. In the wider context, it refers to all those throughout history who have lived and died without the privilege of knowing the details of the law of God revealed through the written commands of the Scriptures.
 - (2) Those who have sinned *U*_____ the Law. This refers specifically to the nation of Israel, who had been entrusted with the Old Testament Law of God revealed through Moses. In the wider context, it refers to all those throughout history who have been privileged to know the law of God as it is revealed in detail through the written commands of the Scriptures.

According to Romans 2:12, note the consequences of sin for both groups—those who have known the law as it is revealed in the Scriptures and those who were never privileged with such knowledge...

Both groups will be judged by the law that they have received, whether it only be the law of God written on the heart or that in addition to the law of God revealed through the Scriptures.

It is understandable how God can rightly condemn those who have known the written code of His law and still rebelled against it, but how can He justly condemn those who have lived and died without ever having access to the Scriptures? In the following texts, two reasons are set forth that prove that God is right in judging all men, even those without the Scriptures.

a. **God has made Himself evident to all men through creation...***Romans 1:19,20*

This does not mean that all men know everything that may be known about God or that all men are granted the same degree of revelation. It means that all men—in every place and at all times—possess sufficient knowledge of the true and living God to be without excuse for their sins on the Day of Judgment. Although limited, God’s revelation of Himself to all men has not been ambiguous or unclear. He has made it “evident” to all men that there is one true God and that He alone should be worshiped. The phrase “within them” suggests that the knowledge of the living God is not demonstrated through the works of creation alone, but that God Himself has imprinted this knowledge upon the very heart of every man. The universe that God has made proves His existence and simply acts as a confirmation of what all men already know—there is one true God, and He is worthy of worship and obedience.

b. **God has placed His law in the hearts of all men..***Romans 2:14-15* This does not mean that there were those among the Gentiles who obeyed God’s law perfectly so as to be righteous before Him (see Romans 3:9-12).

It means that even in pagan cultures there were morals and standards that agreed with God’s law (e.g. high regard for telling the truth, duty to honor one’s parents, prohibitions against murder, etc.).

This stands as undeniable proof that God has written (*i.e.* imprinted or engraved) the essence of His law (love to God and love to one's fellowmen) on the heart of every man. Though multitudes are without the written code of the law revealed through the Scriptures, God has written His law on their very hearts and minds. This law is sufficient to guide men in the right way, despite not being as specific as the written law of Scripture. Therefore, all men will be held accountable on the Day of Judgment. In verse 15, Paul mentions the conscience, which refers to a moral sense of right and wrong within every man, which defends him when he obeys God's law and accuses him in every act of disobedience to God. It is possible for the conscience to be rejected (I Timothy 1:19) to the point that it no longer functions as a moral compass. Paul refers to this frightful state as being turned over to the "degrading passions" of one's own corrupt heart (Romans 1:24, 26) or having the conscience seared as with a hot iron (I Timothy 4:2).

God's Love and Justice

The love of God is the peculiar benevolence He possesses as the loving God Himself (1 John 4:8). His intra-trinitarian love is the delight that God has toward Himself (cf. John 5:20). This is the basis for the love God expresses toward His creatures, which can be classified as either *general* or *special*. The former relates to God's desire to bless all His creatures (Ps. 145:9), while the latter has the elect particularly as its object (John 3:16; Eph. 5:25). This is God's special fatherly delight in His elect as He views them through the lens of Christ Himself (John 16:27; Col. 2:10). This love causes the elect to be accepted for the sake of God's beloved Son (Eph. 1:4–6). Redemption appointed, redemption accomplished, and redemption applied all flow from this steadfast, ceaseless love of the triune God (Lam. 3:22; cf. Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10).

The justice or righteousness of God is His continual perfection according to the standard of what is pure and right—which is Himself. Exercised toward His creatures, the justice of God consists in the execution of judgment, either by reward or punishment, according to what is deserved, as determined by the standard of His holy law. All His works are just (Gen. 18:25; Ps. 7:9).

God's justice is wholly retributive, whether in His rewarding or in His punishing. This is opposed to justice by way of mutual exchange or *remunerative* justice.

Since men's works are vile and filthy (Isa. 59:2–12; Rom. 3:10–18), there can be no proportionate relationship between man's work and God's remuneration. God is never constrained by or indebted to anyone; rather, He executes His justice according to His perfect standard. Furthermore, because He acts not in response to man but according to His own way, God is just both in damning some (Pss. 51:4; 119:137; Nah. 1:2–3; Rom. 2:5–6) and delivering others (Rom. 3:21–22). "His work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment" (Deut. 32:4).

The love and justice of God are not incompatible; both are natural to Him to the superlative degree. God's love is always exercised within the bounds of justice, and He always enforces His justice in a loving manner. His love is wholly just, and His justice is entirely loving—this is the nature of God.

This means that, on the one hand, while He is loving God will not suffer men to trample on His holy law. For Him to allow the propagation of sin to continue would not be love. He must and will punish sin to the fullest degree. This should engender fear of sinning against a righteous God who "hatest all workers of iniquity" (Ps. 5:5–6). Noting God's justice, men must fear and tremble, allowing the terror of the Lord to move them to seek remission for their great sins through the blood of Christ.

On the other hand, this means that God, within His justice, exercises His wondrous love through His Son, Jesus Christ. We see the love of the Father in sending the Son; the love of the Son in bearing His people's sin; and the love of the Spirit in applying the benefits of salvation. All three Persons exercise the depths of eternal, sovereign, infinite, immutable love. No man, when gazing on this fountain, can help but stand captivated in amazement at the majestic love of the holy God.

The love and justice of God are understood best by observing the contours of the gospel. Therein God displayed publicly His righteousness (Rom. 3:21–26) and demonstrated His love (Rom. 5:8). Calvary's cross is where God's love and justice meet (Ps. 85:10). Within Christ, God's justice is not *against* but *for* His people. Christ's people are so fully united to Him that God's justice will not permit them to receive anything but that which is Christ's wage: eternal life in glory. Additionally, within Christ, God's love is unrestrained in bestowing His gifts (Zeph. 3:17; James 1:17). The exercising of His justice and His love come together in the gospel, both for God's glory and for His people's good.

Adapted from Wilhelms à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, vol. 1, ch. 3