

The Righteous Judgment of God

Genesis 18; 2 Thessalonians 1:3–10

The topic of last week’s sermon was “Christian Growth.” The apostle Paul was thrilled to note that the Thessalonians’ faith was *growing exceedingly*, and their love *abounded* toward one another. Moreover, their *patience*—even under persecution—was noteworthy. Would to God that all of us would likewise grow in faith, love and patience!

Today we are going to look more in depth at verse five, specifically at the striking phrase “the righteous judgment of God.” This phrase is found in only two places in the Bible. 1 Thessalonians is widely regarded as Paul’s first epistle (letter). Later, when he will write the epistle to the Romans, Paul will use the same phrase in chapter 2, verse 5: “the righteous judgment of God.” These are the only two occurrences of this phrase in Holy Scripture.¹

A lot of people have an awareness that the God of the Bible is a God of love. We love to quote the verse, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” This is a beloved and very reassuring text. Those who have true faith in Christ will not go to hell but will be with him forever in heaven. That is the *gospel*—the good news—and it is something the church must always proclaim. We are not saved by works—“not by works of righteousness that we have done”—but by faith in Christ, looking to him alone for our salvation. But a true faith is always followed by a life of good works. We don’t do good works *in order* to be saved; rather, we do good works out of a heart of gratitude to God *because* we are saved.

A lot of people are aware that the God of the Bible is a God of love. Christianity is unique in that respect, and we do not want to lose sight of that truth. By contrast, the god of Islam—who is *not* the true God of the Bible—is *never* said to be love. Each *sura* or chapter of the Quran begins with the words “In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All-merciful.” In Islam, God is good and merciful, but the Quran never says that “God is love.” Faithful Muslims are afraid of offending Allah, but they never know him as a god of love. Christians love Muslims and want to see them come to the knowledge of the truth and confess Christ as Lord. We want to see our Muslim friends and neighbors reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, so we pray for them.

The God of the Bible is a God of love. Jesus said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”² He demonstrated that love by doing that very thing: laying down his life for his friends, his elect, those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, those who turn to him in true faith,

¹ The phrasing differs slightly: ἡ δικαιοκρισία τοῦ θεοῦ (Rom. 2:5); ἡ δικαία κρίσις τοῦ θεοῦ (2 Thess. 1:5)

² John 15:13

who will be in his blessed presence forever in glory. This is the story of the gospel. It is a true story, and it is a beloved story.

But in 2 Thessalonians 1:5 we are brought face to face with another aspect of God's character: the true God, the God of the Bible, is also a God of *judgment*. This, as you might expect, is *not* as popular a truth. As a matter of fact, many people are downright *turned off* by this truth. They do not want to believe that it is true. They positively *deny* that it is true. Their minds are made up and they refuse to believe it. Nevertheless, it is a biblical doctrine. The God who cannot lie reveals this attribute of his—and for our good. For the Christian: “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.” Amen!

Our text for exposition and application this morning is very short: “the righteous judgment of God.” As I mentioned before, this is a very striking turn of phrase. Here, the apostle Paul under divine inspiration declares that God's judgment is “righteous.” It is good, true and holy. It is nothing to be ashamed of.

The word translated “judgment” in this expression is κρίσις (from which we get our English word *crisis*), which often refers to a judicial *declaration of guilt, condemnation, and the punishment* that follows.³ For instance, Revelation 18:10, speaking of the fall of Babylon and “the smoke of her burning,” says, “Alas, alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your *judgment* has come.” In this case “judgment” refers to God's punishment upon a wicked city.

Moreover, Hebrews 10:27, in reference to “those who sin willfully,” speaks of “a certain fearful expectation of *judgment*, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.” From a purely human perspective, we would rather see our enemy repent of his sin and turn to God. We would rather embrace him as a friend. Humanly speaking, we do not wish to see another person suffer. But from God's perspective, sin is a direct challenge and affront to his holy character. It is the sinner's declaration: “I do *not* care what God thinks; I will go my own way and will *not* obey.” Judgment that devours the enemies of God is holy, just and good. So Paul speaks of it as “the righteous judgment of God.”

I have three points this morning: (1) there is no *unrighteous* judgment of God; (2) God's judgment is righteous; and (3) God will judge all persons. First,

1. There is no *unrighteous* judgment of God.

The Bible teaches that God is righteous. “Righteous” comes from a word meaning *right* or *straight*. It is akin to the Latin *rectus*, from which we get the words *erect* and *correct*. It is defined as *acting in accord with divine or moral law: free from guilt or sin*.⁴ In the Bible the concepts of good and evil are rooted in God's holy character. God is good. Psalm 34 says, “O taste and see that the LORD

³ Adapted in part from the Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, κρίσις (Logos Bible Software)

⁴ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/righteous> accessed 8-3-24

is *good*: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.” The God of heaven cannot be anything other than good.

Good conduct is in accord with God’s character. Evil is contrary to God’s holy character. For example, the Bible teaches that God is a God of truth; he cannot lie. We humans, who were created in God’s holy image, are not to bear false witness but rather speak the truth with all men. To do such is to do good.

So when I state that there is no *unrighteousness* judgment of God, what do I mean? Let me use myself as an example. If someone, following my demise, were to compile “the good words of Stephen,” it would be perfectly evident to all thinking people that Stephen used bad words too. Stephen, after all, is a sinner. Sad to say, his record is not perfect. It is not pleasant to admit it, but I have said bad words, as well as good. Like David, I have to pray daily, “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Ps. 141:3).

But when the apostle Paul speaks of “the righteous judgment of God,” he is in no way implying that God’s judgment is ever *unrighteous*. Lest there be any question about this, the apostle Peter declares of Christ: “who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself *to him that judgeth righteously*” (1 Pet. 2:23). Yes, God “judges righteously.” Full stop! That is in keeping with his perfect character. God never judges *unrighteously*! We, like Christ, can safely commit ourselves to him who judges righteously. We are safe in his care. He will *never* treat us *unrighteously*.

We may have been the object of slander and attack from people who pretended to be our friends but turned against us, but that will never be the case with God. If you commit yourself to God, you are in safe hands. Nothing and no one can harm you. To be in fellowship with God is to be in the place of safety. How can you be in fellowship with God? There is only one way, and that is to place your faith in him. You must agree with God’s Word that you are a sinner, that you have fallen short of God’s perfect righteousness displayed in Christ. Say to him, “Father, I have sinned against you. I have broken your holy law. I have no excuse. I deserve your judgment. I humble myself before you. Have mercy on me and save me.” The Bible promises, “if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (Rom. 10:9). God will never turn away the sinner who comes to him in true faith.

There is no *unrighteous* judgment of God! Second,

2. God’s judgment is righteous.

Once again, remember Paul’s pithy phrase “the righteous judgment of God.” This is anticipated by Abraham’s question posed to the Angel of the LORD before the destruction of Sodom: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” That is a rhetorical question, and the obvious answer is “Yes, the Judge of all the earth will definitely do right, for he is just.” His judgment is righteous.

Righteous means *according to truth*. This would later be stated explicitly in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. There, in chapter 16, as the holy angels one by one pour out the bowls of God's judgment upon the land of Israel, John would testify: "And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, *true* and *righteous* are thy judgments" (Rev. 16:7). Yes, God's judgments are true and righteous—perfect, flawless, according to truth.

Now John the Revelator loved Israel. He grew up in Bethsaida in Galilee in an observant Jewish family. Some of his earliest experiences involved going to the synagogue every Sabbath and hearing the law expounded. No doubt from time to time he would also go to Jerusalem to worship at the temple with its priesthood and animal sacrifices. He was proud of his Jewish heritage. He and his family were God's people. They were committed to God. It broke his heart when the majority of the Jews rejected the Messiah, the Lord Jesus, at his coming. They heard his teaching and saw the miracles that he did—the healings, the restoring of sight to the blind, even raising of the dead. In the synagogue he had heard many times the prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 35:

"Say to those who are fearful-hearted, 'Be strong, do not fear! Behold, *your God will come* with vengeance, with the recompense of God; *He will come and save you.*' Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert."

God would send his Messiah. He would come to save his people, and when the Messiah came, he would perform miracles that would prove that he was indeed the promised Messiah. The Jews had personally witnessed these public miracles. When Jesus raised Lazarus of Bethany from the dead, the chief priests and Pharisees afterward tried to kill Jesus. They said, "What are we doing, for this man is doing many miracles. If we don't do something, all men will believe on him, and the Romans will come and take away our place and nation." These men were typical bureaucrats. They wanted to hold onto their high-paying jobs. They saw Jesus as a threat. Rather than rejoice that they had lived to see the moment that God had sent his long-promised Messiah, rather than acknowledge Jesus as Israel's Messiah and receive his salvation, they wanted to kill him, so that they could keep their jobs and influence.

The apostle John knew very well the unbelief of his fellow Israelites. Here were men and women that had the very same experiences that he had had. They were not unmindful of the words of the prophet Isaiah that were read in the synagogues. They knew very well that it had been prophesied that the Messiah would one day come and save his people, and that when he came he would perform healings and do other miracles that proved beyond a doubt that he was indeed the promised Messiah. By rejecting him they would bring upon themselves God's severe

judgment. As he sat in enforced exile and imprisonment on the Isle of Patmos and penned the final book of the Bible, which vividly describes God's severe judgments upon his unbelieving people, he would pen the words "Even so, Lord God Almighty, *true* and *righteous* are thy judgments." How true!

Yes, there is no *unrighteous* judgment with God. Indeed, God's judgment is righteous. The God of heaven calls all men, women and children everywhere to believe in his Son, Jesus. "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." He came "to seek and to save that which was lost." "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." The wrath of God—eternal punishment in the lake of fire—is God's final judgment upon unbelief. A lot of people don't like to think about hell. It is so horrible and so frightful. As Hebrews puts it, "For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a *fearful thing* to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31–32). God's judgment is real. It is severe. It is unthinkable. The damned in hell will forever gnash their teeth and weep and wail and curse the God whose salvation they rejected. Their pathetic cries will ring in the ears of Christ-rejectors forevermore, and there will be no escape. The only way to avoid living among them is to flee to Christ for mercy. *Today* is the day of salvation. God commands all men everywhere to repent.

God's judgment is righteous. "Even so, Lord God Almighty, *true* and *righteous* are thy judgments." Amen!

How is the eternal punishment of the wicked righteous? Remember, *righteous* means *according to truth*. The God of truth—the God who cannot lie—has written his moral law on every human heart. "The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Rom. 1:20–21). All men know intuitively that there is a God, that he is eternal, that he is powerful, that they are responsible to this God, that they will one day stand before him in judgment, and that they are morally responsible to seek this God and to serve him. Because of this, they are without excuse. The God who created all things and made man in his own image sent his Son to purchase our salvation. He commands all men everywhere to repent. We cannot save ourselves. Our only hope is to flee to Christ for mercy. The one who comes to him he will in no wise cast out.

The God of heaven has given us his holy law. He promises blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. He promises to punish sin—to judge it eternally. He is the God who cannot lie, who always speaks the truth. If, at the final

day, God were to say, “I’ve changed my mind, I’m not going to punish sin after all,” he would not be true to his holy character. He would deny himself. He would absolutely cease to be God. The One in whom we live, and move and have our being would utterly cease to exist. The whole universe would come crashing in upon itself. There would be no truth anymore—only falsehood. The threatenings of his Word would prove to be idle threats.

If that were the case, there would be no hope for any of us. God must judge and punish sin to be true to himself, to demonstrate throughout all eternity that he is a God who keeps his word, who fulfills all his promises and carries out all his threats, who saves his elect and brings many sons and daughters to glory, and who curses the damned and excludes them from his comfortable presence eternally. The apostle Paul makes this perfectly clear in another text: “But we are sure that the judgment of God is *according to truth* against them which commit such things” (Rom. 2:2). God is righteous; therefore, his judgment—even his eternal punishment of the wicked—is righteous.

Many people do not like this doctrine, but what they are saying is that they do not like the God of truth. They prefer a god of their own imagination who loves everyone, but his love is insipid and meaningless because he loves good and evil equally and loves what is antithetical to his perfect character. Even a lot of professing Christians hate the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the wicked, but hating it does not change it, for the Bible teaches it. God’s judgments are true and righteous, and the only reasonable course is to accept it—to bring all our thoughts captive to the truth as it is in Jesus. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! But today, while we have life and breath, is the day of salvation. Call upon Christ today, before it is too late. He stands ready to save. Amen.

We have established that (1) there is no *unrighteous* judgment of God; and (2) God’s judgment is righteous. There is one more point, and that is that

3. God will judge *all* persons.

Notice finally the context of this pithy saying: “in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God.” Notice that the persecutions and tribulations that the church endures in this age are “manifest evidence” of “the righteous judgment of God.” What is Paul teaching? This: the fact that God is judging his people now in time establishes that he will judge the wicked eternally. It is right for God to judge mankind, made in his image. God will judge *all* persons: both the righteous and the wicked, both the saved and the lost. There are a number of Scriptures that establish that God judges the righteous. Here are three:

“For the Lord will *judge His people* and have compassion on His servants” (Deut. 32:36).⁵

“He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may *judge his people*” (Ps. 50:4).

“For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall *judge his people*” (Heb. 10:30).

When God judges his people in this life, it is for the purpose of refining and improving them, not to punish them. O saint of God, remember that whatever evil he sends upon you in this vale of tears he *will* turn to your good—no exceptions!⁶

But when God judges his enemies in eternity, it is for the purpose of demonstrating his power and vindicating his word.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, for he is a God of judgment. There is no *unrighteous* judgment of God; God’s judgment is righteous; God will judge all persons.

My dear hearer, flee to Christ for salvation. He will deliver you from the wrath to come. Amen.

⁵ NKJV. The KJV has “the LORD shall judge his people, and *repent himself* for his servants.” The verb נחם has two senses: *be sorry*, and *console oneself* (cf. BDB; Halladay).

⁶ Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 9, expounding Rom. 8:28