

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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The Judgment of God

Public opinion polls are used repeatedly to determine how the majority of people respond to some particular issue. These polls do influence people, perhaps more so than we like to think. If the majority of people voice their opinion and this becomes the expected response *most* people when asked will simply echo the majority position. In other words, what happens is that people cease to think on their own and simply defer to the opinion of the majority, regardless of how ill-informed and shortsighted those opinions might be. Cultural critic Neil Postman observes, “We can see this process of responsibility-shift even more clearly in the case of the statistically based ratings of television shows. The definition of a ‘good’ television show has become purely and simply a matter of its having high ratings. A ‘bad’ show has low ratings. The responsibility of a television writer, therefore, begins and ends with his or her ability to create a show that many millions of viewers will watch. The writer, in a word, is entirely responsible to the audience. There is no need for the writer to consult tradition, aesthetic standards, thematic plausibility, refinements of taste, or even plain comprehensibility. The iron rule of public opinion is all that matters. Television executives are fond of claiming that their medium is the most democratic institution in America: a plebiscite is held every week to determine which programs will survive. This claim is given added weight by a second claim: creative artists have never been indifferent to the preference and opinions of their audiences. Writers, for example, write for people, for their approbation and understanding. But writers also write for themselves and because they have something they want to say, not always because readers have something they want to hear. By giving constant deference to public preferences, polling changes the motivation of writers; their entire effort is to increase ‘the numbers.’ Popular literature now depends more than ever on the wishes of the audience, not the creativity of the artist.”¹

There is an obvious application of Paul’s remarks in our text as one recent commentator points out, “But there is also the fact that those who condone and applaud the vicious actions of others are actually making a deliberate contribution to the setting up of public opinion favourable to vice, and so to the corruption of an indefinite number of other people. The full extent of the rejection of God becomes evident in such an attitude. His judgment is known, yet people are encouraged to pursue evil anyway. Those who encourage others to pursue evil commit a greater evil in that they foment the spread of evil and are complicit in the destruction of others. The hatred of God is so entrenched that people are willing to risk future judgment in order to carry out their evil desires. Once again the text hints that the fundamental sin that informs all others is a refusal to delight in or submit to God’s lordship. God’s wrath is rightly inflicted on those who not only practice evil but find their greatest delight in it.”² God is our judge. Psalm 119:137 declares: “Righteous art thou, O Lord, and upright are thy judgments.” The character of God is what makes all His judgments right. God is what He is, so He is what He should be. The great Puritan preacher William Ames once commented, “Although vain men feign to themselves many notions of righteousness, yet there is not true and real righteousness besides that revealed in God’s Word.”³

The late Leon Morris in his classic work on the Biblical doctrine of judgment observed, “Men today have difficulty with the idea of a day of judgment for the whole earth. The mechanics of it trouble some, and the concept of God as a Judge bothers others. Like the Greeks of antiquity they reject the

whole idea, but the men of the New Testament were troubled by no such scruples. On the contrary, they held it to be fundamental and basic that God will judge all men. If God be God, He must judge all creation. Writing to the Romans Paul asks, 'But if our unrighteousness commendeth the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who visiteth with wrath?' He inserts a parenthesis to explain his bold language, 'I speak after the manner of men', and then proceeds, 'God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world?' (Rom. 3:5, 6). The final judgment is not something that must be argued for. It is something that may be argued from. Paul assumes that there will be no dispute about this. It is common ground for all Christians. The writer to the Hebrews takes up much the same position when he speaks of 'eternal judgment' as one of 'the first principles of Christ' (Heb. 6:1)."⁴ If you have seen the movie *The Unforgiven* there is a line by Clint Eastwood that captures the man thought of our text. In response to a remark that the man they had killed had it coming (he deserved what he got), Eastwood said, "We all got it coming." It is because we do not realize the infinitely evil nature of all sin that we have a difficult time accepting at face value the teaching of Scripture on the wrath and judgment of a Holy God. The imprecatory Psalms (like 69, 129, and especially 109) have long been considered (even by some Christians) one of the moral difficulties of the Bible. But long ago Jonathan Edwards rightly said, "We cannot think that those imprecations we find in the Psalms and Prophets, were out of their own hearts; for cursing is spoken of as a very dreadful sin in the Old Testament; and David, whom we hear oftener than any other praying for vengeance on his enemies, by the history of his terrible imprecations that we find in all the Old Testament, are in the New spoken of as prophetic, even those in the 109th Psalm; as in Acts 1:20 . . . They wish them ill, not as personal, but as public enemies to the church of God."⁵ As we come to the close of the first chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul saw no need to vindicate the reputation of God from the charge that He is not acting properly in His judgments. He is just in all that He does. God's righteousness is evident in three particular ways.

I. UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED

The heathen possess this knowledge. They are able to discern the fact that their evil deserves to be punished by God. They possess a moral consciousness. Furthermore, they realize that God's judgments are more than mere temporal discomforts. They deserve (are worthy of) *eternal* death. Note the Apostle's point. They know, but this knowledge does not change their conduct. "But knowledge does not liberate him from practicing sin. Knowledge alone does not save him; on the contrary, it renders him guilty, for his knowledge does not prevent him from practicing that which he condemns; furthermore he completes his resistance against the truth not only by not contracting those who practice evil, but by approving them."⁶

II. ITS INEVITABLE DEMONSTRATION

As certain as effect follows cause, so does punishment follow sin. There is no possible escape from condemnation for those who persist in pursuing unrighteousness (cf. Hebrews 2:3). To practice sin implies deliberation and habit. Note Paul's language here. The word translated *approve* in the NIV (The King James Version has *have pleasure in*) is SUNEUDOKOUSIN. It does not describe simple passive assent or mere acquiescence, but active or hearty approval to act in a certain way (cf. Luke 11:48; Acts 8:1; 22:20; I Corinthians 7:23,13). The Apostle is speaking of those whose conduct involves a deliberate rejection of the light that God has given them. Furthermore, they actually conspire to spread their wickedness.

III. IT IS ESSENTIAL TO GOD'S CHARACTER

God is not free to act contrary to His nature. Justice *always* characterizes God (cf. II Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 2:2; Jude 7). God hates sin because He is holy; it is His *nature* to hate sin. Since God hates sin then He must by His own standard of righteousness punish sin. God's righteous judgment upon sin is *certain, inevitable, and universal*.

CONCLUSION: Herman Bavinck frames the Biblical picture by noting, “The punishments that God has ordained for sin in this life are guilt, pollution, suffering, death, and the dominion of Satan. Guilt is the first and heaviest punishment. The word ‘guilt’ [Old English *gylt*, crime] in the first place means that someone is the author or doer of something, like an AITIA (Gr.), *causa* (Lat.). Usually it includes the idea that someone is the cause of something that ought not to be or to happen (it is his fault). In this sense guilt presupposes that we are obligated to do or to refrain from doing something. We are obligated to keep the whole law (Luke 17:10; Gal. 5:3). And if we fail to keep it, we are guilty. Inasmuch as we are the active cause of the violation, we are under indictment (AITIASTHAI, *accusare, reus*); the act is imputed to us. We must account for it and are obligated to satisfy the law; we are liable to punishment. Guilt is an obligation incurred through a violation of the law to satisfy the law by suffering a proportionate penalty. It binds the sinner, immediately after the violation of the law, to its demand for satisfaction and punishment. People believe that by violating the law they become free from the law, but precisely the opposite occurs: in another way they are now much more tightly bound to its demand. God, who cannot cease to be himself, even though he accords to humans the freedom to oppose him, never relinquishes his hold on them, and the latter never become free from him. At the very moment when they position themselves outside the law (i.e., outside love), it strikes them with its curse and binds them to its punishment. Guilt is an ‘obligation for the purpose of enduring a fair punishment,’ ‘the subjection of a sinner to a penalty.’”⁷

The late Dr. John Gerstner, Professor Emeritus of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was teaching about the depravity of man, and to make his point he compared humanity to rats. After he had finished his address there was a question-and-answer period, and someone who had been offended by the comparison asked Gerstner to apologize. Gerstner did. “I do apologize,” he said. “I apologize profusely. The comparison was terribly unfair. . . to the rats.’ He then went on to show that what a rat does, it does by the gifts of God that make it rat like. It does not sin. But we, when we behave like rats, behave worse than we should and even worse than rats. We are worse than ‘beasts’ in our behavior.”⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (Vintage Books, 1992), p. 136.

² Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary On the New Testament* (Baker, 1998), p. 100.

³ As cited in William S. Plumer, *Psalms: A Critical and Expository Commentary with Doctrinal and Practical Remarks* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), p. 1079.

⁴ L. Morris, *The Biblical Doctrine of Judgment* (Eerdmans, 1960), p. 54.

⁵ John Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards I* (Ligonier, 1991), p. 524.

⁶ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (Hendrickson, 1995), p. 47.

⁷ H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics III* (Baker, 2006), p. 170.

⁸ As cited by James M. Boice, *Romans: An Expositional Commentary I* (Baker, 1991), p. 179.