

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHRISTIANS SIN? - Part three

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Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

### KNOWING THE DIVINE STANDARDS OF JUDGMENT

In the opening teaching in this series I tried to show the practical importance of the whole subject of divine judgment. It's important for *non-Christians*. That we know. But it's also very important for *Christians*. We already seen that it truly relates to the core of the Christian life in at least four key areas:

- a) ***It makes the task of missions and evangelism a valid object of sacrifice and dedication.*** People are "lost" in more than an emotional or psychological sense. They are more than merely "mixed up" in this short earthly existence. They are, as we studied in detail last week, living under the "wrath of God" - John 3:36 - "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him."
- b) ***It makes us relish the preciousness of our own redemption.*** Jesus is passionately adored because He not only doles out good advice on how to live well, but because He alone saved us from the coming righteous wrath of God:

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 - "For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, [10] and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come."

- c) ***The Biblical doctrine of divine judgment affirms the equal glory of both the love of God and the justice of God.*** It relates to the question of whether we want to *know* God. And do we want to know the God of the *Bible*? Because without *both* of these aspects of His character being equally treasured the whole structure of justification by faith starts to crumble. Paul teaches so clearly that there is more happening on the Cross of Christ than mere forgiveness, as precious as that is:

Romans 3:24-26 - "...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25] whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26] It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus."

The Cross of Christ accomplishes *two* absolutely essential things. *First*, the justice of God is revealed. Sin can't be ignored by a holy God. Even we who are fallen and depraved can't abide sins committed against us remaining unaccounted for. How much more an absolutely holy and just God! And *second*, the Cross of Christ is God's means of justifying the guilty sinner. Only the Cross of Christ holds these two facets of God's unchanging nature in perfect harmony. The Cross reveals love and divine judgment at the same time.

- d) ***Finally, the Biblical doctrine of divine judgment is sited throughout the New Testament as an incentive to perseverance in holiness - 2 Corinthians 5:9-11*** - "So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. [10] For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. [11] Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience."

Remember the key point from last week's teaching. The "*fear of the Lord*" that Paul describes in no way diminishes Paul's *love* for the Lord. Any time the beauty of God's absolute, uncompromising righteousness is held before the eyes of a true follower of Christ it is always adored and aspired to. This "*fear of the Lord*" that Paul described only *deepened* his appreciation of God's grace and mercy in the gospel.

So if you think that this *fear of the Lord* is somehow washed away by the new covenant of mercy and grace you just don't understand the new covenant at all. In fact, here is one of the greatest prophetic statements on the nature of the New Covenant in the Old Testament - Jeremiah 32:38-40 - "And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. [39] I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. [40] I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me."

Notice especially that last phrase, "And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me." So this is a *glorious, promised soul-preserving fear*. It's to be cherished about all else because it doesn't pull us *away* from God, but *turns our hearts toward God*.

But I think you will see in today's teaching even *more* good reasons why understanding the Biblical doctrine of divine judgment actually *deepens* our love and adoration of Father God. I want to look, for the next while, at the Biblical description of God as Judge. In other words, we're not just looking at some cold *doctrine* in this study. We're looking at the character and nature of *God Himself*. And spiritual people can never be anything but moved as they look at the infinite marvels of the character and glory of God.

So, we're on a noble and uplifting search whenever we study God. What is the nature of God as Judge, and what are the unchanging standards of His judgment?

### 1) FIRST AND FOREMOST, GOD IS THE RIGHTFUL JUDGE OF ALL THE EARTH

Whether we give due consideration to this fact or not, the Bible gives this truth cornerstone importance in divine revelation:

**Psalm 58:11** - "Mankind will say, 'Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.'"

**Psalm 94:2** - "Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve!"

These two verses are only a fraction of those not only *calling* on God to judge the earth, but *naming* God the Judge of the earth. In other words, judging the world is not only something God *does*, like a painter might also be able to play the piano, but it is also who God *is*. God *is* the Judge of the earth whether we think about it, like it, recognize it, or enjoy it. Being Judge of the earth is part of being the God of the Bible. Being Judge is part of His "*Godness*." No amount of theologizing or theorizing or rationalizing can change who God is. God *is* the Judge of the earth.

This means, whether we see it immediately or not, the universe *has* a moral foundation. It cannot be otherwise.

### 2) GOD'S JUDGMENTS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT AND TRUE IN ABSOLUTELY EVERYTHING

If God really is as the Scriptures describe Him, His judgments *must* be right and good - all the time. This follows simply as night follows day. God's judgments flow from His infinite wisdom, knowledge, mercy and justice. If, as the Bible teaches, God is *all* wise and *all* knowing, then His judgments can't be anything other than perfect.

This doesn't mean we always *see* God's judgments as perfect. Consider the fascinating encounter between Abraham and God regarding the coming judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah:

**Genesis 18:25** - "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?*"

The context of these words is so important. It doesn't *seem* like God is just right now to Abraham. God *is* going to judge Sodom and Gomorrah, just as He said. And Abraham is having a tough time with this. Abraham has *relatives* in Sodom. But long before Abraham finishes his discussion with God on this matter - long before he has any of his questions about this whole process answered - he has already nailed down the bedrock his faith will rest upon. Whatever God does will be the *right* thing to do. This *doesn't* mean Abraham *understands* what God is up to, or that he *likes* what God is up to. But he puts his *own* judgment on the issue *beneath* what he knows to be true about God's *character*.

There is great faith here. It is only easy to do in *theory*, never in *practice*. We all second guess God. It's hard for us to remember our own perspective is *finite, limited, and biased in our own favor*. Only God knows the beginning from the end.

### 3) GOD IS PORTRAYED IN THE SCRIPTURES AS A RELUCTANT JUDGE

**2 Peter 3:9** - "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his *promise* as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should *perish*, [so we know the *promise* of His coming includes the *perishing* of some] but that *all should reach repentance*."

We must all remember that there is nothing *rash* or *impulsive* about God's judgment. Certainly there are times when God's judgment *appears* sudden or severe to *us* (much like the pouring out of His wrath on Sodom in the Scriptures). But, again, this is only because we only see the *event* of God's wrath. We never see, what the Scriptures call, the *cup of God's wrath* filling up over time. We get *used* to the process of our own sinning. We gradually modify our own standards downward over time so that the repetition of our own sin *numbs* our perception of its offensiveness to God.

O, the horrible danger of continuing lightly in even little sins! We naturally modify our standards *downward*, never *upward*. We *adjust* to sin.

But this never happens with God. The cup of His just and righteous wrath only looks extreme from our morally bankrupt position. His judgment *seems* stern to us because He has never accommodated His judgments, as we do, over time.

In truth, Peter says God actually *delays* the final outpouring of His judgment, even though this world is worthy of it right now, because He *doesn't* want anyone to perish. He wants everyone to *reach* repentance. That's why He tarries. Are you *adjusting* to sin or are you *reaching* repentance? His wrath, even when finally poured out, has already been delayed and tempered by mercy.

Unfortunately, in its fallen state, this world frequently abuses and presumes upon such mercy when it's revealed. People actually

*increase* their sin and rebellion when God delays judgment, rather than respond to God's mercy and patience with humility and repentance:

**Psalm 94:1-7** - "O Lord, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! [2] Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! [3] O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? [4] They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. [5] They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage. [6] They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; [7] and *they say, "The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive."*

The key issue here is *why* do these people continue in their wickedness? Don't they believe in God? Yes, they *do* believe in God. But there is a problem. God hasn't *done* anything about their sin - at least not anything they can see. They believe in God, but have *separated* God from the way they live. This is exactly what many people do today.

*Why*, in the Psalmist's words, have these people separated their knowledge of God from the way they live? Because God hasn't *judged* them for their sin. And because God hasn't judged them, *yet*, they assume either He doesn't *know*, or He doesn't *care*. Or, perhaps in a more contemporary vein, they have come to think of God *only* as a loving, tolerant God, who isn't the Judge of all the earth. They've forgotten the very first point of today's teaching. God *is* the Judge of the whole earth. He cannot be otherwise.

You see, we know this much for certain. We know from reading the major and minor prophets in the Old Testament that these people got into the mind-set of not wanting to *hear* about God's judgment. There were a few prophets coming around who would rattle the cage once in a while about how God wasn't going to be mocked, and how the streets would one day be desolate, and how the fields wouldn't produce their crops, and how the temple would be in ruins, and how all the people would start crying out to God for help, and how He wouldn't hear their cries anymore. All of that they heard and knew.

But it wasn't *happening* yet. Everything was beautiful in its own way. And what's more, there were plenty of other prophets coming around. These prophets had learned a different message altogether. They had done their market research. They had discovered what the people wanted to hear. They came and said, "*Peace, Peace,*" when there was going to be nothing of the kind.

The people liked the new message. It was God packaged without any message of divine judgment. People *always* like that kind of message. God was way up in heaven and they were way down here on earth. It didn't even look like God cared a hoot one way or the other. *That's how people turn God's patience and mercy and reluctance to judge into licence to continue in sin.*

Even today, there are misguided Christians who are actually embarrassed that these vivid accounts of divine judgment are recorded in the Scriptures. They feel they have to somehow *redefine* such a violent, vengeful God for this indifferent, tolerant age. I don't understand their thinking at all. These accounts of judgment are in the Scriptures for a reason - a *divinely appointed* reason that we must never tamper with:

**2 Peter 2:4-9** - "For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; [5] if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; [6] if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, *making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly*; [7] and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked [8] (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); [9] then the Lord knows *how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment...*"

We need to remember that Peter writes these words under divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That's what the doctrine of inspiration means. This is why we call this book the "*Word of God.*" This is not Peter's opinion. This is what God says. And what Peter addresses in these words needs careful attention today. He's talking about *why* these vivid accounts of strong, violent judgment are in the Old Testament (and the New Testament as well, for that matter - i.e. Ananias and Sapphira, etc.). God has placed these accounts in the text of Scripture for a reason.

We, just like those to whom these predictions of judgment came so long ago, don't really *believe* in divine judgment. O, we *know* about it. We *read* about it. But we don't usually *see* it, and would probably find a more palatable explanation if we *did* see it.

That's why the Holy Spirit brings these powerful words through the ink of Peter to New Testament Christians (we need to remember that Peter wrote these words to the Christian church!). Peter pleads, "*Remember these judgment accounts. Don't explain them away. Don't be embarrassed by them. They're in there for you. Don't think that it's all different now. Don't tuck these passages away as relics of another era.*"

Paul thought about these judgment themes. That's what he meant when he said he "*knew the fear of the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 5:11). It's God's *love* that keeps these warnings before us! It's His grace that won't allow sanctifying truth to be twisted into humanistic syrup.

This whole world **needs** to hear this message of divine judgment. Before I gave my heart to Jesus Christ I used to lie awake sometimes at night. I would think about the Second Coming. I would think about books being opened. There are some teachers who think this kind of contemplation is a bad thing (I believe we now use the word "**negative**"). All I can say is it wasn't a bad thing for me. And it isn't a bad thing in the Scriptures. It helped open my eyes to the love and mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

I hope it does the very same thing for you today. Embrace the fear of the Lord. See God's patient mercy shining through it. Our God is still the Judge of all the earth. This is what makes the gospel eternally relevant.