

Is the Gospel Unjust?

Romans 3:19-26

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Marburg International Fellowship, September 15, 2002

The “Gospel” is the central message of Christianity, but often we assume that people know it and don’t talk about it too much because we want to move on to new things. Many people never have really heard the Gospel, however, or they have a faulty understanding of it. Also, many Christians do understand the Gospel, but they forget about its importance in their lives. As Jack Miller, a well-known U.S. theologian, used to say, Christians need to preach the Gospel to themselves every day. The Gospel is about how we live our lives. It is not just something we believe one time and then forget about. It is our life.

Romans 3:19-26 gives a summary of the Gospel. The key concept is Romans 3:26-- that God might be both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus. The essential problem which the Gospel addresses is the problem of how God can be both just (be a judge who gives correct judgments) and also not punish evil people who put their faith in him.

In the U.S., every time there is a disaster such as September 11, or a Flood, or a tornado, the TV news interview some theologian and ask how could God allow such things to happen to people, and the theologian says it is an unsolvable problem which people of faith just have to wrestle with-- “How can bad things happen to good people?” In the Bible however, this is not the theological question which is wrestled with. The question the writers of the Bible wrestle with is “How can good things happen to bad people?” In both the Old Testament and the New Testament, the question keeps coming up. Here I am trying hard to follow God, and there is another person who is living a wicked life, and he seems to be doing just fine. Why doesn’t God punish them?

The premise of modern society is that people are basically good. If people are basically good, then it seems unjust for God to allow bad things to happen to them. But the premise of the Bible is that people are basically evil. Verses 10-18 of Romans 3 give a stark picture of people’s evil, summarized by verse 19: “all the world is guilty before God.”

If this is the case, then it is easy to understand why bad things happen-- we are under a curse. But then why doesn’t God destroy all wicked people? Why are some people not cursed, even though they are guilty too? If a human judge said to a proven murderer in a court of law, “I am going to let you go free with no punishment,” we would say that was an evil judge, not a good judge.

Of course, if we said “Tonight God will destroy all wicked people in the world,” who would be left tomorrow? If God wants to save some people from destruction, who can he save except wicked people?

There are two premises of the Gospel that lead to a problem. The first premise is that God is perfectly just. The second premise is that people are basically sinful. Therefore, for God to not punish us is a problem.

It is important to understand the foundation of the Gospel in God’s justice. God is perfectly just and will judge properly. Some Christians undermine this by giving a version of the Gospel that makes God seem unjust. They don’t want to offend anyone by saying that they are not good, so they say “I know that you are basically good, but you see, God is a perfectionist. If you step out of line one tiny bit, then God will condemn you.” Now, if a human judge (or parent) was to say, “Aha, you didn’t file your nails properly-- I’m going to punish you with boiling oil and torture!” we would say he was unjust. To cancel this injustice, they then add another claim that makes God seem even more unjust: “But if you just pray this prayer, then God will judge you as a good person even though you are not.” So God condemns most people unjustly, but unjustly does not condemn some people even though they deserve it, because they do a little ritual.

This is not the message of the Bible. God is perfectly just-- when he judges the world, he will give us exactly what we deserve, not more and not less. If there are extenuating circumstances that affected our decisions, he will take that into account. He knows how we were raised and how our parents treated us, he knows all the pressures we feel, he knows our feelings (including our sexual feelings), and he knows them all first-hand, since he felt them himself when he walked on the earth.

So we are not faced with a “perfectionist” God who punishes things beyond what they deserve. So then do we have a problem? Ask yourself-- if God gave you exactly what you deserve, no more and no less, what do think you would get? To think about this, imagine that someone has followed you around every minute of every day for the past two weeks with a video camera, and recorded every little thing that you have done. In addition, they have recorded every thing you said, and also recorded every thought that you have thought to yourself, and every thing that you imagined to yourself. Then this film will be played in a public court of law. Would you be worried? If you feel you are basically good, why would this worry you?

If you wouldn’t have a problem with that, then the Gospel is not for you. The Gospel is for those who know that if they got exactly what they deserved, they would be in a lot of trouble.

I can't tell you what your sins are. All I can say is that I know that I myself deserve condemnation. Romans 3:10-19 gives a picture of people who are evil through and through-- "whose mouths drip poison"-- not people who are basically good but just "make a few mistakes" or have a few "imperfections." I can testify that this describes me. I don't see this in other people all the time, because I can't see people's hearts, and people are good at hiding their true thoughts, but if they are like me, then the picture of Romans 3:10-18 is correct.

This passage goes on to say (in verse 24) that what we need is "justification," that is, to be "justified." This is a big word that sounds very theological, but it is the great motivation of all people's lives. It is our greatest psychological felt need. To be justified means to be good-- to be able to say that I am justified in what I do-- to feel "okay" about myself, to have "self esteem." I deeply want to feel that I am good.

Most people get their sense of justification from all of the many judgments that other people pass on them all the time. We want people to approve of us, and not disapprove. We are concerned about what they think about us and say about us, because we want to be judged as good. But because of sin, I fear that if people knew the real me, they would condemn me. So I create an "image" for them, so that they will approve of me. There are many different images that people create. One person is "shy." The motivation is "if you don't know me, you can't judge me." Another person is talkative. The motivation is "the best defense is a good offense-- I'll keep you at arm's length with my words so you can't get too close." Another person runs to fun and excitement all the time, because constantly having fun means never having to think about yourself. Another person is "chic"-- wearing the correct styles, watching the correct movies, buying the correct things-- because they fear people will think they are stupid if they don't know about these things. Another person is "defensive"-- always arguing that they haven't done anything wrong. All of these people want to feel "okay" about themselves, to feel "justified." One person's image may irritate someone else, but they are all concerned about how people will judge them and creating their own images.

The Gospel says that people's judgments don't matter. If God says you are evil, then a good image among people is meaningless. And if God says you are good, then you are good-- nothing people say can change that. If the Creator of the universe, who made you, says you are good, what does it matter what any little person says?

This is one place where we really have to get the Gospel "in our bones." Christians may know that God loves them, but still spend half of their lives worrying about what people think. The Gospel gives us freedom from that, if we realize that we have no need to fear any person. One who lives constantly in fear is like a slave. Many Christians can testify of the wonderful

sense of freedom that came when they first realized that they didn't have to worry about what anybody said or thought about them, because God's opinion was all that mattered.

But we still have not addressed the problem of justice in the Gospel. How can God call us good? We know, if we are honest with ourselves, that we do and think terrible things. How can God be just and call us good? If God is just, then he cannot lie. He can't just say that we are good. It has to be actually true that we are good. How can that be? For God to be honest in calling us good, two things have to happen: first, I have to have made up for every bad thing I ever did, and second, I have to have done some good thing which deserves a reward. How can I do that? If I try to make up for every bad thing in the past, at the same time I am doing more bad things. If I try to do some good thing, it is often tainted with pride and selfishness. Many people try for years to become good on the basis of their good works and self-sacrifice, only to find that they fail miserably.

The core of the Gospel is that Jesus has done both of these things for us. He paid for every bad thing that we have done when he died on the Cross, and he earned a reward for us by his good life on earth.

Many people know this part of the Gospel, but reject it because it seems unjust. I once participated in a Muslim-Christian dialogue group and this was their main objection. It is unjust, they say, for God to punish someone else for my sins and to give me a reward for someone else's good deeds. What do we say? Is it unjust? Can God be both just and the justifier of the sinner?

What they are missing is an essential part of the Gospel, the doctrine of union with Christ. Paul goes on to discuss this concept at great length in Romans 6. Through the Spirit we are spiritually united to Christ. He lives in me and I live in him. In this way, his death becomes my death, and his good deeds become my good deeds. Therefore, in a very real way, I can say that I have paid for my sins, and I have earned a reward by Christ's good deeds. God can look at me and say "he is truly good" because Christ in me is good. It is not a fiction or a lie if Christ is really in me.

The Bible teaches that this is not true of all people; not everyone is united to Christ. For Christ to be in me there has to be a spiritual transformation. This is what the Bible calls being "born again." Some people think "born again" Christianity is some special version of Christianity from the Southern U.S. But it is the language the Bible uses, e.g. John 3:3, 1 Peter 1:23, 1 John 5:1. Other phrases the Bible uses for the same thing are "being indwelt by the Spirit" (Romans 8:9), having a "living heart" instead of a "hard heart" (Hebrews 3:12), having our "eyes opened" instead of being "blind" (Matthew 13:16) and having Christ "live in us" (John 5:38, 14:23, Ephesians 3:17). This is an essential teaching of the Gospel, not an optional, higher

experience for some people. If Christ does not live in you, then his death is the death of someone foreign to you, and is of no value to you, and your sins are still unforgiven.

Some people may wonder how this comes about. The great thing about the Gospel that makes us want to share it with everyone is that it is not hard. All you have to do is ask. You do not need to go to the top of a mountain, or meditate for years, to have some special spiritual experience. All you need to do is ask Christ to come into your life, and trust that he will do it, because he has promised that all who ask will receive (Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:13). In fact, to want to have this happen is to already have it happen, because it is the Spirit that causes us to want him to come into our heart. It is not a matter of “praying a prayer.” It is matter of turning your life over to him. If you sincerely want him to come into your life, he will.

This brings us to the consequences of the Gospel. The Bible says that to come to Christ is to “repent,” which means to stop doing evil and start doing good. Many people are confused by this. If we are forgiven of all our sins through Christ, and God has already pronounced me “good,” then why should I be concerned about repenting of evil and doing good deeds?

The answer, again, comes from understanding the doctrine of union with Christ. If Christ lives in me, he gives me new desires. He makes me hate what is evil and love what is good. Hating what is evil makes me realize the awfulness of my sins and seek to be forgiven. But it also makes me seek to not do those evil things again, because I hate them, and to want to obey God, because I love the things he commands.

This is why many people do not want to ask Christ to live in them, even though it is very easy, in principle, to have that happen. To ask him into your heart is to give up control of your own life. He may make you want to do things that you didn't plan to do. He comes to change your whole life. That can be frightening. We all hate change. But many Christians will testify that it is a wonderful thing, and a joyous thing, to be united to Christ.

Again, this is not a special, higher experience for a special type of Christian. This is an essential part of the Gospel, that Christ lives in us. To come to him at all is to come to him unconditionally, to give him my whole life. If I have faith in him, I have faith that he will make good changes in my life.

In summary, some key points to remember about the Gospel. First, we must never present a picture of God which is unjust. God is perfectly just both in punishing people and when he forgives people through Christ. We do not need to tell people that God judges beyond what they deserve; we need to tell them they will get exactly what they deserve, and let them decide whether that is a problem.

The second point is the freedom that comes from the Gospel, if God in his justice has judged us as good (“justified” us.) Then it doesn’t matter what anyone says or thinks about us.

The third point is that God is perfectly just in doing this, if we are united to Christ, because Christ is truly good, and if he lives in me, then God is truly able to say that I am good. Christians need to remind themselves of this every day.

The fourth point is that anyone can know that Christ lives in them, simply by asking him. To ask this, however, is to revolutionize your life, because the Spirit in us will change our desires and our goals and our whole perspective on things, for the better. This is not an optional, higher experience for just some Christians, it is the essence of God saving us according to the Gospel.