

Of the Justice or Righteousness of God.

by John Gill

The sermon explores the attribute of God's justice, discussing its natural and essential nature, various sorts or branches, and displays in His works.

Scripture: Exodus 9:27, Psalm 36:6, Psalm 92:15, Psalm 145:7, Jeremiah 12:1, Daniel 9:9, Romans 3:26, Romans 9:14, 1 John 2:1, Revelation 16:5

Topics: "God's Justice", "Righteousness of God"

Description

John Gill expounds on the justice and righteousness of God, emphasizing that these attributes are essential and inherent to His nature. He argues that God's righteousness is acknowledged by all rational beings and is crucial for His role as the Governor of the world. Gill distinguishes between various forms of righteousness, including remunerative and punitive justice, asserting that God's justice is evident in His providential governance and in the redemptive work of Christ. He highlights that God's justice does not contradict His grace, as both are perfectly harmonized in the salvation of believers. Ultimately, Gill reassures that God's righteousness will be fully revealed in the final judgment.

Transcript

A Body of Doctrinal Divinity

Book 1--Chapter 21

OF THE JUSTICE OR RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD.

Concerning this attribute of God, I shall, 1. First, Show that it does belong to him, and is natural and essential to him. The scriptures do abundantly ascribe it to him; all rational creatures, angels and men, good and bad, acknowledge it in him, (Rev. 16:5; Ex. 9:27; Jer. 12:1; Dan. 9:9; Ps. 145:7) and remove all unrighteousness from him, and affirm there is none in him (Ps. 92:15; Rom. 9:14). And, indeed, without this attribute, he would not be fit to be the Governor of the world, and the judge of the whole earth; his government would be tyranny, and not yield that pleasure and delight to the inhabitants of it, it does; the reason of which is, because "righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne" (Ps. 97:1, 2).

And from his love of righteousness, and constant performance of it, it may be concluded it is natural to him; as what is loved by men, and constantly done by them, shows it to be agreeable to the nature of them, (Ps. 11:7, 9:4) and, indeed, it is originally and essentially in God; it is in and of himself, and not of

another; it is his nature and essence, and is not derived from another. Adam was righteous, but not of himself, God made him upright, or righteous; saints are righteous, not by their own righteousness, but by the righteousness of Christ imputed to them.

But God is righteous in and of himself; his righteousness is essential and inderivative, and is incommunicable to a creature; it is not that by which men are made righteous, as Osiander dreamed; for though he who is Jehovah is their righteousness, yet not as he is Jehovah; for then they would be deified by him: the righteousness of God being his nature, is infinite and immutable; the righteousness of angels and men, in which they were created, was mutable; Adam lost his, and many of the angels lost theirs; but the "righteousness" of God is "like the great mountains", as high, firm, and stable as they, and much more so (Ps. 36:6).

Righteousness in creatures, is according to some law, which is the rule of it, and to which it is conformed, and is adequate so the law of God, which is holy, just, and true, is a rule of righteousness to men; but God has no law without himself, he is a law to himself; his nature and will the law and rule of righteousness to him. Some things are just, because he wills them, as such that are of a posture kind; and others he wills them because they are just, being agreeable to his nature and moral perfections.

This is an attribute common to the three Persons in the Godhead, as it must be, since it is essential to Deity, and they partake of the same undivided nature and essence: hence the Father of Christ is called by him "righteous Father", (John 17:25) and Christ, his Son; is called Jesus Christ "the righteous", (1 John 2:1) and no doubt can be made of its being proper to the Holy Spirit, who convinces men "of righteousness and of judgment" (John 16:8). But, 2. Secondly, I shall next consider the various sorts, or branches of righteousness, which belong to God; for though it is but one in him, being his nature and essence; yet it may be considered as diversified, and as admitting of distinctions, with respect to creatures.

Some distinguish it into righteousness of words, and righteousness of deeds. Righteousness of words lies in the fulfilment of his words, sayings, prophecies, and promises; and is no other than his veracity, truth, and faithfulness; which will be considered hereafter, as a distinct attribute. Righteousness of deeds, is either the rectitude, purity, and holiness of his nature; which appears in all his works and actions, and which has been treated of in the preceding chapter; or it is a giving that which belongs to himself, and to his creatures, what is each their due.

So justice is defined by Cicero[1], an affection of the mind, "Suum cuique tribuens"; giving to everyone his own. Thus God gives or takes to himself what is his due; or does himself justice, by making and doing all things for his own glory; and by not giving his glory to another, nor his praise to graven images: and he gives to his creatures what is due to them by the laws of creation, and governs them in justice and equity, and disposes of them and dispenses to them, in the same manner.

Justice, among men, is sometimes distinguished into commutative and retributive. Commutative justice lies in covenants, compacts, agreements, commerce, and dealings with one another, in which one gives an equivalent in money or goods, for what he receives of another; and when integrity and uprightness are preserved, this is justice. But such sort of justice cannot have place between God and men; what he gives, and they receive from him, is of free favour and good will; and what they give to him, or he receives from them, is no equivalent for what they have from him; "What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits towards me?" (Ps. 116:12) nothing that is answerable to them.

Besides, God has a prior right to everything a creature has or can give; "Who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed to him again?" (Rom. 11:35). Retributive justice is a distribution either of rewards or punishments; the one may be called remunerative justice, the other punitive justice; and both may be observed in God. 2a. Remunerative justice, or a distribution of rewards; the rule of which is not the merits of men, but his own gracious promise; for he first, of his own grace and good will, makes promises, and then he is just and righteous in fulfilling them; for God, as Austin[2] expresses it, "makes himself a debtor, not by receiving anything from us, but by promising such and such things to us."

And his justice lies in fulfilling his promises made to such and such persons, doing such and such things; and not in rewarding any supposed merits of theirs. Thus, for instance, "The man that endures temptation shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to them that love him", (James 1:12) but the crown of life is not given according to any merit of it arising from enduring temptation, or loving the Lord; but in consequence of the promise of God graciously made to such persons, for their encouragement thereunto.

Moreover, the reward is not of debt, but of grace; or God, in the distribution of rewards to men, rewards not their works, but his own grace; he first gives grace, and then rewards that grace with glory; called, "the reward of the inheritance" (Col. 3:24). And this seems to be no other than the inseparable connection between grace and glory, adopting grace, and the heavenly inheritance; which, he having of his own grace put, does in justice inviolably maintain. Indeed, the remunerative justice of God is sometimes represented in scripture, as rendering to every man according to his deeds, or as his work shall be, (Rom. 2:5-7, 10, 22:12).

But still it is to be observed, that the reward given or rendered, is owing, to the promise that is made to them for godliness, whether as a principle of grace, or as practised under the influence of grace; or godly persons have "the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come", (1 Tim. 4:8) which promise is punctually and righteously performed. Besides, God does not reward the works and godly actions of men, as meritorious in themselves; but as they are the fruits of his own grace; who works in them both "to will and to do" of his own pleasure; and therefore he is "not unrighteous to forget their work and labour of love"; which springs from love, is done in faith, and with a view to his glory (Heb. 6:10).

Moreover, the works according to which God renders eternal life, are not mens' own personal works; between which, and eternal life, there is no proportion; but the works of righteousness done by Christ, of which his obedience and righteousness consist; and which being done by him, on their account, as their Head and Representative, are reckoned to them; and, according to these, the crown of righteousness is given them by the Lord, as a righteous Judge, in a way of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8). 2b.

Punitive, or vindictive justice, belongs to God; It is a righteous thing with God to render tribulation to them that trouble" his people, (2 Thess. 1:6) and so to inflict punishment for any other sin committed by men; and this has been exercised by him in all ages from the beginning of the world; and has appeared in casting down from heaven to hell the angels that sinned; in drowning the old world; in destroying Sodom and Gomorrah; in the plagues on Egypt, on Pharaoh and his host; the righteousness of which was acknowledged, in some of the instances of it, by that wicked king, (Ex. 9:27) in each of the captivities of the Jews, and in the destruction of that people; and in the judgments of God on many other nations, in each of the periods of time; and as will be seen in the destruction of antichrist and the antichristian states; the righteousness of which will be ascribed to God by the angel of the waters, and by all his people, (Rev. 16:5, 6, 19:1, 2) and in the eternal punishment and everlasting destruction of ungodly men: and this

righteousness is natural and essential to God; but this the Socinians[3] deny, because they do not choose to embrace the doctrine of the necessity of Christ's satisfaction for sin, which, if granted, they must give into.

But that punitive, or vindictive justice, is essential to God, or that he not only will not let sin go unpunished, but that he cannot but punish sin, is manifest, 2b1. From the light of nature: hence the accusations of the natural conscience in men for sins committed; the fears of divine vengeance falling upon them for it, here or hereafter; the many ways and means devised to appease angry Deity, and to avert punishment, some absurd, and others shocking; to which may be added, the name of dikh, vengeance, or justice, punitive justice, the heathens give to deity; see (Rom. 2:14, 15; Acts 28:4). 2b2.

From the word of God, and the proclamation which God himself has made; in which, among other essential perfections of his, this is one, that he will by no means clear the guilty, and not at all acquit the wicked, (Ex. 34:6,7; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3). 2b3. From the nature of God, "who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity"; cannot bear it, but hates it, and the workers of it; which hatred is no other than his punishment of it (Heb. 1:13; Isa. 1:13, 14; Ps. 5:5, 6). Now as his love of righteousness is natural and essential to him; so must hatred of sin be; to which may be added, that "he is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). 2b4.

From the nature of sin, and the demerit of it, eternal death, everlasting punishment and destruction. Now if sin of itself, in its own nature, merits such punishment at the hands of God, he is obliged to inflict it; or otherwise there can be no demerit in it. 2b5. From the law of God; the sanction of it, and the veracity of God in it: sin is a transgression of the law; which God, as a lawgiver, cannot but punish; otherwise his legislative power and authority is of no effect, and would be despised: he has annexed a sanction to his law, which is death; and his veracity obliges him to inflict it; nor is it any objection to all this, that then all sinners must be necessarily punished; since the perfections of God, though natural to him, the acts and exercises of them are according to his will; as has been instanced in his omnipotence and mercy.

Besides, it will be readily allowed, and even affirmed, that no sin goes unpunished; but is either punished in the sinner himself, or in his Surety. The reason why some are not punished in themselves, is, because Christ has made satisfaction for their sins, by bearing the punishment due unto them. Hence, 2b6. From sin being punished in Christ, the Surety of his people, it may be strongly concluded, that punitive justice is essential to God; or otherwise, where is the goodness of God to his own Son, that he should not spare him, but awake the sword of justice against him, and inflict the whole of punishment on him, due to the sins of those for whom he suffered, if he could not have punished sin, or this was not necessary? and, indeed, where is his wisdom in being at such an expense as the blood and life of his Son, if sin could have been let go unpunished, and the salvation of his people obtained without it? and where is the love of God to men, in giving Christ for them, for their remission and salvation, so much magnified, when all this might have been without it? but without shedding of blood, as there is no remission, so none could be, consistent with the justice of God; no pardon nor salvation, without satisfaction to that: could it have been in another way, the prayer of Christ would have brought it out, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass me" (Matthew 26:39).

But, 3. Thirdly, I shall next consider the displays of the righteousness of God in his works; and vindicate his justice in them; for "the Lord is righteous in all his ways" (Ps. 145:17). 3a. In his ways and works of providence: he governs the world in righteousness, orders and disposes of all things in judgment; and though he does according to his sovereign will and pleasure in heaven and in earth, yet he acts according

to the strictest rules of justice and equity; "Just and true are his ways"; "he is the Judge of all the earth, who will do right", (Rev. 15:3; Gen. 18:25) and does do it; nor is he chargeable with any unrighteousness in any of his ways and works: men may wrongly charge him, and say, as the house of Israel did; "the way of the Lord is not equal"; when it is their ways that are unequal, and not his, (Ezek. 18:29) nor is it any sufficient objection to the righteousness of God in his providences, that good men are often afflicted, and wicked men are frequently in very prosperous circumstances: these things have been stumbling and puzzling to good men, and they have not been able to reconcile them to the justice of God (see Ps. 73:4-13; Jer. 12:1, 2).

As for the afflictions of God's people, these are not punishments for sins, but chastisements of them; were they indeed punishments for sin, it would argue injustice, for it would be unjust to punish twice for the same sins; once in their Surety, and again in themselves: but so it is not; their afflictions come not from God as a judge, but as a father; and not from his justice, but his love; and not to their detriment and injury, but for their good. In short, they are chastened by the Lord, that they might not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:32).

And as for the prosperity of the wicked, though their eyes stand out with fatness, and they have more than heart can wish, yet they are like beasts that are fattened for the slaughter; their judgment may seem to linger, and their damnation to slumber, but they do not; sudden destruction will come upon them; the tables will, ere long, be turned, and the saints, who have now their evil things, will be comforted; and the wicked, who have now their good things, will be tormented: justice, though it may not so apparently take place now, it will hereafter; when all things will be set to rights, and the judgments of God will be manifest.

There is a future state, when the justice of God will shine in all its glory. 3b. God is righteous in all his ways and works and acts of grace; in the predestination of men, the choice of some, and the preterition of others. While the apostle is treating on this sublime subject, he stops and asks this question, "Is there unrighteousness with God?" and answers it with the utmost abhorrence and detestation, "God forbid!" Election is neither an act of justice nor of injustice, but of the sovereign will and pleasure of God, who does what he will with his own; gives it to one, and not to another, without any imputation of injustice: if he may give grace and glory to whom he will, without such a charge, then he may determine to give it without any.

If it is no injustice in men to choose their own favourites, friends, confidants, and companions; it can be none in God to choose whom he pleases to bestow his favours on; to indulge with communion with himself now, and to dwell with him to all eternity: if it was no injustice to choose some of the angels, called elect angels, and pass by others; and even to condemn all that sinned, without showing mercy to one individual of them; it can be no injustice in him to choose some of the race of men, and save them, and pass by others, when he could have condemned them all.

Nor can the imputation of Adam's sin to all his posterity, be accounted an unrighteous action. God made man upright, he made himself a sinner: God gave him a righteous law, and abilities to keep it; he voluntarily broke it: God constituted the first man the federal head and representative of all his posterity; and who so fit for this as their natural head and common parent, with and in whom they were to stand and fall; and what injustice could be in that; since had he stood they would have partook of the benefits of it; as now he fell they share in the miseries of it? and since they sinned in him, it can be no unrighteous thing to reckon it to them; or that they should be made and constituted sinners, by his disobedience.

It is not reckoned unjust, among men, for children to be punished for the sins of their parents, and particularly treason; and what else is sin against God? (Ex. 20:5). The justice of God shines brightly in redemption by Christ; "Zion, and her converts, are redeemed in righteousness"; a full price is paid for the redemption of them; and in it "mercy and truth meet together, and righteousness and peace kiss each other": and though it is not for all men, no injustice is done to them that are not redeemed; for if God could in justice have condemned all, it can be no act of injustice to redeem and save some.

Suppose one hundred slaves in Algiers, and a man out of his great generosity, lays down a ransom price for fifty of them, does he, by this act of distinguished goodness and generosity, do any injustice to the others? or can they righteously complain of him for not ransoming them? In the justification of men, by the righteousness of Christ, the justice of God is very conspicuous; for though God justifies the ungodly, yet not without a perfect righteousness, such as is adequate to the demands of his righteous law; even the righteousness of his own Son, in the imputation of which, and justification by it, he appears to be "just, and the justifier of him which believes in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

Though God forgives sin, yet not without a satisfaction made to his justice; though it is according to the riches of his grace, yet through the blood of Christ shed for it; and upon the ground of the shedding of that blood, God "is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness", (1 John 1:9) and so it is both an act of grace and of justice; as is eternal glory and happiness, being the free gift of God, through Christ and his righteousness. ENDNOTES:

[1] De Finibus, l. 5.

[2] Enarrat. in Psalm cix. tom. 8. p. 521.

[3] Socin. de Salvatore, par. 1. c. 1. Praelection. Theolog. c. 16. Crellius de Deo, "ejusque attributis", c. 25. in fine.

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