



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“The Justice of God, or Does God Punish Sin?”

At verse 24, Romans chapter 1, verse 24 through verse 32. Now in the context you will remember Paul has stated that the theme of the epistle to the Romans is the righteousness of God and salvation for those who have believed. Then he in the eighteenth verse has launched into a description of the outpouring of the wrath of God. And in the twenty fourth verse he deals particularly now with the judgment that God has pronounced upon man as a result of his sin,

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful,

inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.”

Paul’s canvas upon which he has painted his picture, dark, foreboding, threatening; flashing with lightning crashing with thunder, is crammed with forms and figures of sin wrath and judgment, and the wrath is total and complete in encompassing all and rendering all without excuse.

One of the outstanding Swiss preachers is Walter Lute. And he has preached for many years in the city of Bern. And some years ago he was preaching in the *munster* or the cathedral in Bern. And as he began his Sunday morning sermon on this section he said, “In the words we have just read we are told the whole truth about our condition. There may well be people among us who cannot bear to hear the truth and would like to creep quietly away out of this church. Let them do so if they wish.” So as Mr. Lute has given his audience an invitation, if you don’t want to stay the rest of the night you may creep quietly out too, if you wish.

For the subject tonight is not a very pleasant subject. “The Justice of God, or Does God Punish Sin?” This is the concluding lecture on our series of studies on the attributes and this one is one of the moral attributes. We have had goodness, holiness and justice. These are the three of the moral attributes of God. We had the volitional attributes of power and will and the intellectual attributes of knowledge, wisdom, veracity. So we are concluding our series on the attributes and this is the last of the moral attributes, “The justice of God.”

Now this is the outline that we are going to be following tonight. Roman I: The character of the justice of God.

Justice and holiness are related. Someone has said that justice is really a mode of holiness, looked at as the author of our moral nature; God is holy. And he in his creation of man has reproduced himself in that sense. Adam and Eve were created sinless.

Now looked at as the author or looked at as the one who deals with his rational creatures, he is just. So looked at as the author of our moral nature, he is holy. Looked at in his dealings with us, he is just. These are related attributes holiness and justice.

Capital A: The definition of the terms.

The two Greek words -- or the two words -- one Greek and one Hebrew for justice are the Hebrew word *tsadak*. And if you wanted to spell that it’s, T-S-A-D-A-K; *tsadak* and the Greek word is the word “*dikaiois*,” D-I-K-A-I-O-S. These two words both have the idea of conformity to a rule or a standard and they may be used with things and they be used with persons.

Let’s look at a couple of illustrations. Turn with me first to Leviticus chapter 19, verse 36. Leviticus chapter 19, verse 36. In giving instructions to Israel in their civil law Moses says, Leviticus chapter 19, verse 36, “You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin; I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt.”

Now that is a reference to an object or a thing. And one may use the term, “just with it,” conformity to a rule or to a standard. Let’s turn back to Genesis chapter 18, verse 25 in the familiar account of the encounter of Abraham with the Angel of the Lord or the three men one of whom turned out to be the Lord. And as Abraham intercedes for Lot in the city of Sodom he says in the twenty-fifth verse of Genesis chapter 18, “Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?” And here, of course, the reference is to a person dealing justly.

One final passage -- one that we’ll refer to again several times tonight -- Deuteronomy chapter 32, verse 4. Deuteronomy 32, verse 4. Here in the song of Moses

near the end of the law we read in verse 4 of Deuteronomy chapter 32, “The Rock! His work is perfect, For all His ways are just; A God of faithfulness and without injustice, Righteous and upright is He.” Now when we speak of God conforming to a standard we must be careful not to make God subordinate to the standard.

Now when we say conforms to a standard, we do not mean that he conforms to some standard outside of himself. If that were true there would be something outside of God by which he is determined. The standard to which he conforms is his own nature. And so when we read that, “God is just,” we mean that he is in perfect harmony with his own nature of justice.

Now a distinction is usually made between his absolute and his relative righteousness. And so Arabic I in our outline: “His absolute righteousness.” Absolute righteousness is the rectitude of the divine nature by which he is righteous in himself. His absolute righteousness is his own nature of infinite righteousness. Now our text in Deuteronomy said, “Righteous and upright is He.” And if that text refers to what he is in himself -- I am inclined to think that it does in that last line -- then it refers to his absolute righteousness. He in his nature is righteous. His relative righteousness is something a little different. Arabic II: “His relative righteousness.” This is the attribute by which he gives to each what is due him. So his absolute righteousness is what God is in himself. His relative righteousness is that by which he gives to man what is due man.

And I’m inclined to think that that is the meaning of the second line of Deuteronomy 32:4, “The Rock! His work is perfect, For all his ways are just,” and so when he deals with men we have a relative righteousness, a righteousness related to them. When he is looked at in himself, he is absolutely righteous. So his absolute righteousness is his rectitude in which he is righteous in himself. His relative righteousness has to do with his giving of man what is due him. Capital B: “The distinctions applied to the justice of God.” It usually said that there are three aspects of his justice. Arabic I: His rectoral justice.

Now this is the rectitude by which -- or with which -- he rules both the good and the evil. When we speak of God’s rectoral or his ruling justice, we’re speaking about his institution of moral government in the earth. Now this is necessary because of creation. Since he has created man and since he has created the created world it is necessary for him to establish the laws of their existence. And so his institution of moral government in the world, his institution of law, his promises of reward and his threats of punishment these make up his rectoral justice. He lays down a just law.

Now we read in Romans chapter 1, verse 32 these words. You need not look there right now but Paul remember said, “And although they know the ordinance of God,” that is the righteous requirement of God. That is his rectoral justice. It is his law for his whole creation necessary because of the creation. Now second, as you can see, I’m trying to get to distributive justice and that is what we’re going to deal with particularly tonight is, retributive distributive justice. So second his distributive justice. This is the rectitude with which he executes the law distributing, justly rewards and penalties. His rectoral justice has to do with his law for creation. His distributive justice is the execution of his law, and it has to do with rewards and penalties. By virtue of his law, he distributes rewards and he distributes penalties.

Now this distributive justice is also of two kinds. And little a in the outline, “remunerative justice.” And little b, “retributive justice.” Remunerative justice. Now I asked my wife this afternoon what was remunerative justice, and she wouldn’t answer me. And I asked her what was retributive justice, and she knew what retributive justice was. And then I asked her what rectoral justice was and she said, “I’m not going to answer you because if I answer you then you’ll tell the whole class tonight what I said and everybody will have a laugh at me.” And so I’m telling it anyway. [Laughter] So I told her that you enjoyed the comments that she makes to me and I enjoy them too. That’s why I ask her these things.

Remunerative justice, “What is that?” Suppose someone had come to you tonight before the class and said, “What is remunerative justice?” Now why would you have felt so blank? Well now what is remunerative justice? Well this is the distribution of rewards to both men and angels. And we have passages in the word of God that refer to it. Let’s turn to Romans chapter 2, verse 7. Romans chapter 2, verse 7. Now in verse 6 Paul says, “who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life.” Now this is remunerative justice. It is the distribution of rewards to both men and angels. Remunerative justice is the expression of God’s love, his *agape*, his love.

Now this is necessary because of sin and salvation, this remunerative justice. It proceeds on the ground of relative merit only. If, of course, God were to look at us absolutely, there would be nothing in us that he could possibly reward for there is nothing in you or me that is rewardable. So if we were looking at ourselves and if God were looking at ourselves absolutely there would be no remunerative justice. We have no absolute merit. We are dependent upon him because we are his creatures. And furthermore, we are dependent upon his providence. We are dependent upon all of the means by which he blesses us, preserves us and, of course, for Christians redeems us. We have then no absolute merit. That is what our Lord refers to in Luke chapter 17, verse 10 when speaking about the servant, he says, Luke chapter 17, verse 10, “So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.’”

Now what that means is that all of the rewards that God ever gives to a Christian are totally, totally -- so far as we are concerned -- undeserved. But yet God does promise certain rewards, so relatively we do have merit. It is something that he himself has promised to give. So that his rewards flow out of his promises to us; which are promises in grace. It flows out of his covenant relationship in to which he enters with every Christian, so that absolutely we would not have any remunerative justice any distribution

of rewards. But relatively we do because of the divine promises. As I’ve been saying to you over and over again for about five years at least, “all of our being, all of our faculties even the disposition to employ what we have rightly is from God.” So there is nothing in me that is rewardable, not one thing. And it is well for us to remember that.

It is just as if I had created a watch and were to look down at this watch that I have created, and by virtue of some fact I should now be in debt to the watch. It would be impossible for me to be in debt to the watch. I am the one who has made it. All of the motion of the watch I am responsible for. And so I am not in any way obligated to that which I have made. And even this comparison is inadequate because in the case of us God has even made the material. And so if I should have made the material for the watch and then have made the watch, I would not be in obligation to the watch. And so God is not obligated to us in any way absolutely.

It is only by virtue of his gracious promises that he is able to give us rewards. So everything that we have comes from God even our disposition to employ the things that he gives us. Over the weekend in Augusta -- you know what I preached on over there -- I just went over there to stir up that congregation a little bit because I had never preached to them. I told them on the first night, “I’m going to stir you up this weekend,” and I did stir them up. And the young people responded tremendously on Sunday night -- we had about forty or fifty. It was not a large congregation -- about two hundred people -- and about forty or fifty high school and college kids came in the house and for an hour and at least an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes, maybe an hour and a half they plied me with all kinds of questions about free will, sovereignty, election.

I began on Thursday night preaching on election and that started things going fairly nicely. And I had quite a bit of opposition from a few of the adults. And I sat down with one particularly -- one young lady, very lovely person -- and I told her; she said something to me about why do you think this is so important. I said, “Well actually the question of our will and human salvation is a question that touches salvation by grace.

It is the most fundamental question in the Christian life. Is salvation all of God or is it part of me?” And I pointed out to her that if salvation was of the human will in any way, then we could say, “God did it all except the fact that I made my own decision.”

Now I said, of course, “we do exercise faith but the question is, ‘is that faith self-originated or not?’” And then she confessed. She said well you know -- now she was not too happy to make this confession either -- she said, “You know I must confess I had been hiding behind my human will for all these years and I’ve been saying that I was saved by grace but I have believed that Jesus Christ died and I made my own decision and I’ve been trusting in my faith.” And she was honest enough to admit it. And I’m hoping as she thinks about these things that she will realize that it is not salvation by grace if Jesus Christ does everything; but we must exercise our own will, our own self-originated activity of the will.

Now I am reading through the Bible as you know. I want you to know I’m on page five hundred fifty, five hundred fifty-one now. Proceeding along rapidly and I’m really enjoying reading through this edition of the Bible. And there is a passage in 1 Chronicles chapter 29, verse 14 which I want to read to you because it touches on what I’m saying. This is what David says, and he was a fairly good theologian for an Old Testament man. And all of the things that he says are worth reading. Let me assure you. This is what he says in 1 Chronicles chapter 29, verse 14.

Now I’m going to have to read this in a slightly different translation because I’ve checked -- tell it not in Gath, publish it not in Ashkelon -- but I’ve checked 1 Chronicles 29:14 in my new edition. I’m not quite there. I’ll be there by the weekend. And unfortunately the word “generously” in verse 14 is misrendered. The Authorized Version, the American Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version and the Hebrew all have to offer “willingly” or “voluntarily.” The word -- the Hebrew word means to give a free will offering.



Now let me read it as it should be rendered, “But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For all things come of Thee, and of Thine own have we given Thee.” In other words, the very thing that we give God are things that come from God. You see it? “And of Thine own have we given Thee.” So remunerative justice; remunerative justice is the justice by which God distributes rewards to saints who are faithful and to the angels. And he does it out of the pure grace of his promises. We do not deserve any of them.

Now what are the rewards? Well in Romans we are told the rewards are peace and life. We don’t have time to deal with the details of that. Let’s go on to retributive justice. Retributive justice, this is the second kind of distributive justice. Retributive justice. What is retributive justice? Well it is the opposite of the remunerative justice. It is the infliction of penalties. If the other is the expression of the divine love, this is the expression of the divine wrath -- to pronounce it as the British do, “roth; wrath.”

Now then I want you to notice Romans chapter 1, verse 32 again. Now you need not turn there right at the moment, I’ll just read it, “And although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death.” There it is; retributive justice. Remunerative justice is relative. That is we would not deserve anything if it were absolute. It is dependent upon his promises. But this is absolute. This is necessary because of sin and tradition. Man does not merit his reward, but he does merit his penalty. Unlike holiness, sin is not divinely inniated. Sin comes from us. Retributive justice is God’s necessary act. In Exodus chapter 34, verse 7, God says, “He will by no means clear the guilty.” He has to punish sin because he is holy, because he is just.

Now third, his redemptive justice. Redemptive justice is something slightly different. God in his redemptive justice recognizes the faith righteousness of the righteous and brings it to light and triumph. Redemptive justice is God’s honoring of what he has done for us in bringing us the trust in Christ.

For example, let’s take a person who is not a Christian. Now he is listening to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit works. The Holy Spirit in efficacious grace brings him to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, brings him to life so that he exercises faith. Open his heart so that he gives attendance to the things spoken by the preacher. He is born again. He is given new life. One of the things that happens to him is that he is justified. He is declared righteous. Remember the righteousness of God is that righteousness which his righteousness requires him to require. And when we believe in Jesus Christ that is imputed to us, reckoned to us so that the moment a man has his heart opened to respond to the things spoken by the preacher, at that moment he is born again and he is given new life. He is justified. He is declared righteous before God.

Now his redemptive justice is his recognition of the righteous, those that are righteous by faith and his bringing of that wonderful transaction to light and triumph. And in the Old Testament it is wonderfully set forth in many passages of the word of God. For example, the Old Testament says that he establishes Israel in righteousness. It says he helps them in righteousness. It says he hears them in righteousness. It says that he delivers them in his righteousness. What it means is he recognizes those who have believed and who are now justified. And he exercises himself on their behalf because they are justified. He is really honoring his work in them.

Now since I am a believer and since if you are a believer, you are a believer. That’s a good statement isn’t it? If you are a believer, you are righteous. We also may speak of God’s righteous activity toward you. That is his acknowledgement of you and his acknowledgement of what has happened to you. And he delivers you in righteousness. He helps you in righteousness. It is the faith righteousness which he has conferred upon you and by which you stand justified before God. Luther for a long time felt that the righteousness of God was simply his retributive justice. That is he was going to judge us for our sins.

But when he was reading the Old Testament preparatory to giving some messages on the Psalms. He came across Psalm 72, verse 2 in which it is stated that the Lord would deliver them in righteousness. And he couldn’t put that together with his idea of righteousness because how could God deliver them in righteousness if his righteousness is that by which he judged us? And so that started him thinking. It made him realize that the term the righteousness of God in the New Testament and in the Old Testament was not simply God’s retributive righteousness, but also referred to his redemptive righteousness. And so the Holy Spirit finally opened his eyes to see that when a man believes on the Lord Jesus Christ he is given a righteousness of God. He is justified, and Luther liked to say that the thing that before has been a terror to him became, of course, the greatest joy of his life and was really the mainspring of the Protestant Reformation: his recognition that God justifies sinners. He said he thought of God as a God who sat on a rainbow and hurled thunderbolts at man. That is he was thinking about God’s retributive justice, but he discovered that God was a merciful and gracious and long suffering God who conferred righteousness upon men in grace. Now that’s the heart of the gospel when a person understands that he understands what the gospel is all about. So God’s redemptive justice is his recognition of that.

Now in the Old Testament -- in particularly in the Book of Isaiah -- Isaiah speaks about Israel’s guilt about their unrighteousness and he does that often. But he also speaks about he is going to bring them forth in righteousness in the future. That is he is going to manifest to the world those whom he has -- or is in their case -- going to justify. And that great work which he is going to do, he is going to manifest to the world. He is going to bring righteousness forth.

Now when you read the Old Testament you ask yourself the question, Is the righteousness by which he judges us or is this the righteousness which he confers upon us in faith? because if you do not do that you will not understand the Bible in your reading of it.

Now let’s come on now to Roman II: The special character of retributive justice.

I don’t want to get off and talk about Romans 3 and how God justifies sinners because that would get us a little off the track, but that is redemptive righteousness. A few features of retributive justice must be noted before we turn back to Romans 1. First of all Capital A: The logical evidence for retributive justice. Does God punish sin?

Now we’ve seen enough text already, to realize he does punish sin. There are many texts in the Bible that set it forth and those passages that we have referred to. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? He will by no means clear the guilty. These express that and so I’m not going to try to prove it from the Bible. I don’t think there is anything from the Bible that is easier to prove than, that God judges sin. But I want to also try to support it with some logical evidence also. Conscience attests the necessity of retributive judgment. Listen to Romans chapter 2, verses 14 and 15, “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the law, these, not having the law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.”

In other words, God has placed within the heart of every man a conscience. And the thoughts that arise within the inner man involved with his conscience are thoughts that either excuse or accuse us. And that has been planted by God within us in order to be a light for him. And so our conscience lets us know that there is such a thing as judgment. And I do not think that I have to explain that to you, for if you are a member of the human race you know precisely what I mean. It is something that is inherently in the heart of every man. He senses that when he has disobeyed God that he is to be punished. And he doesn’t have to be told because there is a Scripture text to support it because he senses the guilt.

Now that’s why psychiatrists have so much business in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. That’s why psychologists have so much to do. It’s because of guilt as a result of sin. Now I’m

sure they never realized how much they were dependent upon the God of the Bible for their living.

Then sacrifices. Sacrifices in the pagan world argue for retributive justice; because in the pagan world there was an inherent sense of the need of satisfying divine justice. And isn’t it a striking thing that people who have never read anything about the Bible, never read the Old Testament at all, when something happens and when sin takes place they rush to offer an animal sacrifice; and even in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century men are offering animal sacrifices because they sense the need of satisfying divine justice. In Judaism, every day God spoke through the sacrifices. In the morning a lamb was slain. At the evening a lamb was slain. Many many sacrifices went on in the life of Israel. They were designed to stress the fact that sin demands death.

Now that was God’s way of instructing them all through the years. Then on special days, on the feast days, there were special offerings. On the Day of Atonement there were not only offerings of lamb. There were offerings of a bullock. There were offerings of goats. And all of this was designed to illicit within Israel the consciousness of guilt. Do you remember the writer of the epistles, the Hebrews in the tenth chapter says in verses 1 through 3, “For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins.”

The very fact that year after year after year the Day of Atonement sacrifice was offered was designed to show Israel that those animal sacrifices did not put away sin. They had to be repeated every year. Israel had to be restored to covenantal relationship with God every year. And as they look at the sacrifices God intended for them to get the consciousness of their sins he says in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin.

And as if to emphasize it, one of the instructions that was given to Israel on the Day of Atonement, was it not only were they to offer these offerings: the bullocks, the goats but they were also to afflict their souls or to humble themselves. They were to enter into the experience of the thing. It was not simply a ritual for them in the mind of God. They were to offer the offerings but they were to reflect upon them. And they were to say, “Now what is the message of this?” And the message is we are deserving of death because of our sin. And they were to look within and review their own spiritual condition and afflict their soul as a result of this reminder of their sin. So the sacrifices in Israel were designed to show that retributive justice is one God’s attributes. The only way it could be pacified is by the cross of the Messiah.

And have you ever noticed the universally observable connection between sin and misery? That is universally observable in human nature. Oh I know what you’re thinking. You’re thinking about some man that you think is a great sinner and he’s been getting along pretty well at the present time. There are some apparent exceptions to this. The Psalmist you remember said that when he went into the sanctuary of the Lord he saw their latter in and then he changed his viewpoint about whether they really were so happy in their prosperity and fortunate in their prosperity.

But ordinarily when a man sins he suffers misery. And when sin occurs in the human race misery follows. Look at the broken homes; that almost always means misery. Divorce when out of the will of God almost always means misery. There is an observable connection between sins and misery. Murder brings misery. All of the sins, adultery brings misery. There is an observable connection between it. It is God’s way of reminding us that sin brings retributive justice.

Now, second, the vicarious satisfaction of it. Retribution is necessary with respect to sin but free and sovereign with respect to the sinner. There has to be punishment of the sin but God is free and sovereign about punishment of the sinner. What I mean by this is the sin must be punished, but not necessarily in the person of the sinner. It is true

that justice is not obliged to accept the substitute, but neither is it obliged to refuse a substitute. The substituted penalty is something which God in his freedom and in his sovereignty may provide.

Now the penalty, which is a substitute for man’s suffering, retributive justice must be a full penalty. It must be complete. And furthermore, the one who substitutes must be one who is not himself under the judgment of sin, but God in his sovereignty and in his freedom may punish sin in the person of a substitute. So the sovereignty and freedom of God relates not to the abolition or relaxation of the penalty, but to the substitution of it. God is not free to relax the penalty. God is not free to overlook the penalty. He cannot say, “I think I will just forget all about punishing sin.” He must punish sin. So he either punishes sin in the person who has sinned or in the person of a substitute.

Now that is evident from the teaching of God’s Word. By the way, intuitively the Romans also understood that because there is evidence of in Rome and in Roman customs, of one being guilty and of others volunteering to take the penalty for them. Now, God, of course, can choose his methods whereby he will do it.

Now people sometimes ask, “Well if God does really punish sin and punishes sin in the person of the substitute, where is the mercy in his forgiveness?” Well the mercy in God’s forgiveness is that he provides that substitution. There is mercy in permitting another person to do for the sinner what the sinner is supposed to do for himself, and still greater mercy for providing the person, and still greater mercy in becoming that person himself. And so God has exercised tremendous mercy in being the substitute whereby he satisfies his own retributive justice, that is his freedom, but he cannot avoid the punishment of sin. And as you know, the story of the gospel is how God in his retributive justice punished Jesus Christ for us, and how in his mercy he provided him, and how through faith we may go free.

Now often people say we are saved by mercy. There is a sense in which that is true, but let me assure you that does not mean that God has relaxed his standards in any way for us. When we say we are saved by mercy, we do not mean that God has relaxed his requirements. We do not mean that somehow that he has been able to say, “I will not carry out the penalty that my nature requires.” I think every Christian ought to come to the sense of what it means to be saved righteously. We are saved righteously. Our salvation is a righteous salvation.

When I enter heaven I do not have to apologize. I do not have to say I am coming into heaven with, well, I see it in the bleachers. You see the righteousness that is provided for me is the perfect righteousness of God. It was his mercy to provide the Son to pay the penalty but the salvation that I have is a righteous salvation. That is why we read in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,” because Jesus Christ has died for that sin. And so God is not overlooking anything when he forgives us. Our Lord has provided for it and we righteously have forgiveness. He is faithful and just, righteous, true to his own character to forgive us.

Now you know that’s a tremendous thing. I don’t see how anyone can hear something like that and not get excited. That is tremendous to realize that my salvation is a perfect and complete salvation, and I don’t have to enter heaven as if I’m getting in somehow by God relaxing his requirements. No, I fully meet every requirement that God has; for the penalty had been paid in the substitute. And I have a righteous salvation, that’s why it says, “I’m justified.” It’s great truth.

The purpose of it; there are two views about the purpose of the salvation we have. The Greeks sophists said it was reformation. In other words, they said all punishment by God’s retributive justice was to reform us. It looked into the future. It was prospective. And you do find even today people saying that the punishment of a sin



or an evil is designed to be for the public good. And men are punished because of the public good of being punished.

Now that’s not so good, because you see back in the days in a century or so ago in Britain, for example, if you forged the document you were executed because they felt it was the public good to warn everybody it was a bad thing to forge a document. And the way to do it was to put you to death for forging a document. And so obviously you can put a lot of fear into people’s hearts by having the death penalty for things that don’t really deserve the death penalty. If you have the aim of the public good in mind, why you might make it a death penalty for stealing, as in some societies it has been a death penalty for stealing. On the other hand, you don’t want a law that is lax.

And of course, you can guess from what I’m saying that I do think it is a scriptural thing, a wise thing, a logical thing, a reasonable thing for there to exist a death penalty for the proper crime. In other words, there must be exact justice. If our justice is indulgent, then crime shall soar. If it is cruel, well then there is discouragement and loss of the enjoyment of life. And so in the Bible the purpose of retributive justice is retrospective. That is the justice is the exact punishment suited to the crime and nothing is kinder than exact justice. It prevents extremes of indulgence or cruelty.

Now we’re going to come finally to a Pauline vindication of retributive justice. And I want you to turn with me now back to Romans chapter 1. Romans chapter 1. Isaiah in chapter 28 has spoken of judgment as God’s strange work and his strange act. And yet this is essential in Paul’s thought. We read in verse 18 of Romans chapter 1, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” And then Paul unfolds here this tremendous revelation of the wrath of God upon sin. They are without excuse, men.

And in verse 24, in this terrible refrain, this terrible light motif, the Germans like to say, “God gave them over. He expresses divine judgment for the sin.” Verse 24, “Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity,” Verse 26, “For this

reason God gave them over to degrading passions,” and in verse 28, “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind.”

Now there’s been a considerable debate over what it means when it says, “God gave them over,” some not willing to see that this was a divine judgment. Our age does not like judgment. They don’t like to be told that God is really judging today. They don’t like that at all. And unfortunately, some of our Christians are affected by that too. Well there has been some considerable debate over what it means when it says, “God gave them over.” Some have said that it has a permissive sense; that is, God simply permitted these things to arise. He did not give them over to a degrading mind or degrading passions -- I should say. He permitted these things to arise.

Now you’ll notice this is an active voice in each of these cases. It does not say God permitted. It does not say it happened. It says, “God gave them over to these sins.” Others have taken a little stronger opinion and have given it a privative sense. That is, God deprived them of certain restraints that he had been exercising. Now remember when we were talking about common grace, one of the aspects of common grace was God’s restraint of sin in the world. If he were to allow sin to manifest itself as it really is in the hearts of men, we would have utter chaos in the world. We would have a total jungle everywhere; even in this church building probably. But in his restraint, his common grace he keeps us from sin. So some have given it this sense.

They say he withdrew his restraining hand and men, therefore, went into degrading passions. In other words, like a boat that is held by a rope, but finally gives way. And so God attempted to restrain, restrain, restrain man from his sin but finally he gave up and let them go, the privative sense P-R-I-V-A-T-I-V-E. Again, this word is positive active. God gave them over. It does not say God let go as if finally it got so strong even God couldn’t control it. What Paul is talking about is something that is penal and judicial. God gave them over to impurity. God gave them over to degrading passions. God gave them over to a depraved mind. In other words, he positively gave

men over to the cultivation of the lust of their hearts. That is judgment. I wish I had time to turn to Ephesians 4:19 for there Paul says that men gave themselves over. That’s the human side. That’s the free agency side. That’s the human responsibility side. We weren’t forced to do it. That’s what we wished to do. But now, here we have just as plainly as it could be possibly said that moral depravity is the result of the judgment of God.

Now that’s an amazing thing. I want you to think about it for a moment. That is not the way people ordinarily think of it. Moral depravity is the result of the judgment of God. What most men think is that moral depravity is that which brings the judgment of God. Moral depravity here is the result of the judgment of God.

Now that raises some questions, a couple of interesting questions. One of them is the significance of immorality, crime and violence in Western life. What’s the real significance of immorality, crime and violence in our civilization? To compound the problem the newspapers are filled with stories of clergyman encouraging sexual license. Many Christian ministers -- contrary to Paul’s teaching -- no longer regard homosexuality and other sexual abhorration in which Paul refers in verse 26 and 27 as sin. It’s rather a sickness or a weakness.

In an article in one of our national news magazines a few years ago homosexuality was referred to by the author as an undesirable handicap. To many today it is nothing more than a deviation to customary sexual patterns a kind of third sex. We have men, women, and then we have these people. [Laughter] The gay people. And occasionally, in what must seem to Christians the ultimate sin, the ultimate insult to God, you will read that some have the nerve to blame God for homosexuality saying he made us what we are. I get little excited about this because you see it is so plain in the Bible, so plain in the word of God I am surprised when a Christian -- and do not misunderstand me, there are many Christians even evangelical ones -- who say those things about homosexuality.

Look at it, “God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.” Some years ago the famous Harvard sociologist, Patierim Sorokin, in his book the *Crisis of Our Age* warned that increases in crime, suicides, mental breakdown, revolutions and war have been symptoms of civilizations in the midst of death pangs.

In another article on homosexuals, *Time* magazine wrote, “At their foolish flowering; the Persian, Greek, Roman and Muslims civilizations permitted a measure of homosexuality; as they decayed it became more prevalent.” And later Sorokin in his *American Sex Revolution* pointed out that sex anarchy leads to mental breakdowns rather than the other way around as the Freudian psychologists taught. And further, he pointed out that increasing sexual license leads to decreasing creativity and productivity in the intellectual, artistic and economic spheres of life.

What then are the sources of the problems of the present age? Well Spindler had a biological answer. He said the problem is simply civilizations grow old just like people. And our civilization has grown old. Toynbe had a religious answer. “Civilizations failed to respond to the higher challenges of the spirit and therefore, fossilized.” Albert Schweitzer in his *Civilization in Ethics* tried to find an ethical answer. Paul’s answer is different. Paul’s answer is plain and clear. What’s the trouble with Western civilization? It stands under the judgment of God. What we see about us my dear Christian friend is not a civilization in danger of judgment.

Now you often hear preachers say that. I want to get up in the audience and shout, “Wait a minute study the Bible!” Our civilization is not in danger of judgment unless you mean final judgment, eternal punishment. It’s in danger of that. It’s on the way to it, if it’s not rescued. My dear friends when we look out around, us as Christians

,and we see immorality, crime, violence, all kinds of sexual sins; we don’t say, “If we don’t watch out we are going to be judged.” That’s misinterpretation of the word of God. My dear Christian friend the fact that we look out and see what we see is evidence that we are under the judgment of God. That is God’s judgment. That’s what Paul says. That’s what he says because men have sinned; God gave them over, not will gave them over.

Now in certain years, God restrains sin. Certain years he allows sin to flower. But we are always under God’s judgment. We’re not in danger of judgment. That is not the sign that we are approaching judgment. That is our judgment. And so his judgment is to give sinners to their sin and that’s what has done.

Now I know what you might be thinking. “Well, Dr. Johnson it doesn’t say anything about eternal judgment here.” No, that’s right. It doesn’t. He’s talking about a punishment that is not eternal. It is retributive justice, but listen this retributive justice is followed by eternal justice.

Now that is evident from many texts in the word of God. And it is -- I think -- particularly evident here. And sad to say we are embarrassed by eternal judgment, even evangelical seminaries seem embarrassed by it. One evangelical seminary in California has just revised its doctrinal statement. And now in the doctrinal statement, which formally had that its faculty members had to believe in eternal torment, they’ve eliminated that. They now have to believe simply that men are separated eternally from God. But you see separation eternally from God might even permit -- though I’m sure this is not what they believe -- but the language itself might even permit an annihilation. The idea of people being in conscious, everlasting torment is not a happy thought for the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, but it is a biblical thought. It is perhaps the simplest thing to prove in the word of God. There’s an old story about Boswell and Dr. Samuel Johnson that contains a solemn truth. Dr. Johnson, in the presence of Boswell appeared over fearful as to his future. And Boswell said, “Think of the mercy of your Savior.” “Sir,” replied Dr. Johnson, “My Savior has said that he will place some on his right hand and some on his left.”

Henry Ward Beecher and William G. T. Shedd were two leaders in their day and Shedd was the evangelical and Beecher was too -- in many ways -- but Shedd was the theologian, a lot of difference. A theologian -- that’s what I’m trying to make out of you. Theologian. So the *North American Review* suggested to Beecher -- one of the most famous preachers of the day -- that he write an article on eternal punishment because he was against it. He said that, “I believe punishment exists both here and the hereafter but it will not continue after it ceases to do good with a God who could give pain for pain sake, this world would go out like a candle.” They have misrepresented God a little bit there.

Shedd was asked to write an article refuting Beecher’s position, but they asked Shedd to write his article first and then they said that Beecher will send the article to you and then you can criticize it. “We’ll put the two publications in the *North American Review*.” And when they sent Shedd’s article to Henry Ward Beecher, he wired back from Denver, Colorado, “Cancel the engagement, Shedd is too much for me.” I have belief in eternal punishment now myself. Get somebody else. [Laughter] He’s a great preacher.

Now there was one other question. I know I’ve gone over time tonight. The people in the tape room there are wringing their neck or hair or something, but one final question. When did this retribution occur? When did God bring the whole human race under judgment? Well now we don’t have time to deal with this, but it is evident from the reading of Romans that Paul regards that great event as having occurred when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden. Ever since then; we are not a people headed for judgment, we are people under judgment.

And my dear Christian friend, tomorrow when you read the newspaper and you read of rape and homosexuality and depravity and all the other sins; do not say, “God surely must be about to judge America.” That is the evidence of his judgment. It has already come to pass. There are other indications that Genesis is imbued here because if you read these words of this passage you will notice that he uses the terminology of

Genesis chapter 1 and chapter 2. That is when it occurred. Ever since then we have been under judgment. Oh how necessary it is for us to escape by faith in Jesus Christ. For this whole world about us, my dear Christian friend is headed for the final judgment. Its doom has already been settled. Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father we are grateful for the revelation of God. We thank Thee Lord that we have fled for refuge to Jesus Christ by Thy grace. Accept our thanks in His name. Amen.