

God's Love of Justice



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Ps. 33:5, Ps. 85:10, Deut. 32:4, James 1:17, Titus 1:2, Exod. 32:14, Matt. 5:43–48.*

Memory Text: “ ‘But let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD, exercising loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth. For in these I delight’ says the LORD” (*Jer. 9:24, NKJV*).

In the ancient Near East, the “gods” of the nations were not only fickle, immoral, and unpredictable, but they also commanded atrocities, such as child sacrifice. And even then, the pagan masses could not count on their favor, and so they dared not cross their tribal “deities.”

According to Deuteronomy 32:17, behind such “gods” were demons (*see also 1 Cor. 10:20, 21*). And their forms of worship were ripe for exploitation, leaving the people in great spiritual and moral darkness.

The God of the Bible could not be more different from these demonic forces. Yahweh is perfectly good and His character changeless. And it is only because of God’s constant goodness that we can have any hope, now and for eternity.

In stark contrast to the false gods of the ancient world, and even to the modern “gods” of today, as well, Yahweh is deeply concerned about evil, suffering, injustice, and oppression—all of which He constantly and unequivocally condemns. And, most important, He will one day eradicate them all, as well.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 8.

Love and Justice

Throughout Scripture, love and justice go together. True love requires justice, and true justice can be governed by and meted out only in love. We are not used to thinking of these two concepts together, but that is only because both love and justice have been greatly perverted by humanity.

Read Psalm 33:5, Isaiah 61:8, Jeremiah 9:24, Psalm 85:10, and Psalm 89:14. How do these texts shed light on God’s concern for justice?

These texts explicitly declare that God loves justice (*Ps. 33:5, Isa. 61:8*). In Scripture, the ideas of love and justice are inextricably linked. God’s love and God’s righteousness go together, and He is deeply concerned that righteousness and justice be done in this world.

For good reason, then, the prophets consistently decry all kinds of injustice, including unjust laws, false scales, and injustice and oppression of the poor and the widows or anyone vulnerable. Though people perpetrate many evils and injustices, God is the one constantly “ ‘exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth’ ” (*Jer. 9:24, NKJV*). Accordingly, throughout Scripture, those faithful to God greatly anticipate divine judgment as a very good thing because it brings punishment against evildoers and oppressors, and it brings justice and deliverance for the victims of injustice and oppression.

In fact, righteousness and justice are the foundation of God’s government. God’s moral government of love is just and righteous, quite different from the corrupt governments of this world, which often perpetuate injustice for personal gain and personal power. In God, “mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed” (*Ps. 85:10, NKJV*).

And God makes it clear what He expects of us. “He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (*Micah 6:8, NKJV*). If there is anything that we should reflect of God’s character, love—and the justice and mercy that stems from it—would be central.

What are examples, even now, of perverted human justice? How, then, can we not cry out for God’s perfect justice to come one day?

God Is Entirely Good and Righteous

God does not simply claim to love justice and call people to love and do justice, but God Himself perfectly and unwaveringly *exemplifies* these traits. Scripture teaches that God is entirely holy, faithful, righteous, and loving. God only and always does what is loving, righteous, and just. He never does any wrong.

Read Deuteronomy 32:4 and Psalm 92:15. What do these passages teach about the faithfulness and righteousness of God?

These and many other passages declare that God is just and loving—“there is no unrighteousness in Him” (*Ps. 92:15; compare with Ps. 25:8, Ps. 129:4*). God “will do no unrighteousness. Every morning He brings His justice to light; He never fails, but the unjust knows no shame” (*Zeph. 3:5, NKJV*). Notice the direct contrast of God’s character over and against that of those who love injustice.

God knows what is best for everyone, wants what is best for everyone, and continually works to bring about the best outcome for all involved.

Read Psalm 9:7, 8 and Psalm 145:9–17. What do these verses teach about God?

The God of the Bible is “a just judge” (*Ps. 7:11, NKJV*), and no evil dwells with Him (*Ps. 5:4*). As 1 John 1:5 teaches, “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (*NKJV*). Indeed, God is not only perfectly good, but according to James 1:13 (*NKJV*), “God cannot be tempted by evil” (*compare with Hab. 1:13*).

In all this, God’s goodness and glory are inextricably connected. While many idolize power, God is all-powerful, but He exercises His power only in ways that are just and loving. It is no coincidence that when Moses asked God, “‘Show me Your glory,’ ” God responded by saying, “‘I will make all My goodness pass before you’ ” (*Exod. 33:18, 19, NKJV*).

Why does such a good God allow for so much of the evil that is in this world? Discuss your answer in class.

God's Changeless Character

Read Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17. What do these passages teach about God's character?

In Malachi 3:6, God declares, “ ‘I am the LORD, I do not change’ ” (*NKJV*). While some read this part of the verse and take it to mean that God does not change in any way whatsoever, the rest of the verse and its immediate context shows that the changelessness of God affirmed here is God's moral *changelessness*. The rest of the verse indicates that God may change relationally, for God says: “ ‘Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.’ ” And in the very next verse, God proclaims to His people, “ ‘Return to Me, and I will return to you’ ” (*Mal. 3:7, NKJV*).

So, God does enter into back-and-forth relationships with His creation, but through all such back-and-forth relationships, and through everything else, God's character is constant. This is likewise affirmed in James 1:17, which proclaims that all good and perfect gifts come from God, with whom there is no variation. God is not the source of evil.

Here and elsewhere, Scripture repeatedly teaches that God's character is unchangeable. In other words, the Bible consistently teaches that God is *morally* changeless. Yet, God can and does enter into real relationship with creatures, to whom God responds, but always with love and justice.

Read 2 Timothy 2:13; Titus 1:2; and Hebrews 6:17, 18. What do these texts teach about God?

God cannot deny Himself; God never lies; and God's promises are unbreakable. We can be confident that the God of the Bible is the same God who (in Christ) willingly gave Himself for us on the cross. He is a God who can be trusted, without reservation, and we can have confidence and hope for the future because, as Hebrews 13:8 puts it, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (*NKJV*).

How can you learn to trust in the goodness of God even when things have gone really badly in your life? What does the image of God on the cross do to help you learn to trust in His goodness?

A Repenting God?

Can God “repent”? If so, what would that mean? We have seen that God’s character never changes. However, some biblical texts speak of God as “repenting” or “relenting.” At least for humans, repentance involves recognition that one has done something wrong. How, then, can some biblical passages depict God as “repenting”?

Read Exodus 32:14 and compare it with Jeremiah 18:4–10. What do you make of these descriptions of God’s “relenting”?

In these and many other passages, God is depicted as relenting of judgment in response to some repentance or intercession by people. God promises that, if the people will turn from their wickedness, He will turn from the judgment He planned. God’s turning from bringing judgment in response to human repentance is a common theme throughout Scripture.

Read Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29. What do these texts teach with regard to whether or not God “relents” or “repents”?

These passages explicitly declare that God “ ‘is not a man, that He should relent’ ” (1 Sam. 15:29, *NKJV*) and “ ‘God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?’ ” (Num. 23:19, *NKJV*). Read in light of the other passages, these texts cannot be taken to mean that God does not “relent” at all, but instead they convey the truth that He does not “relent” or “repent” in the ways that humans do. Rather, God always keeps His promises, and while He will change course in response to human repentance, He does so always in accordance with His goodness and His Word. God relents from judgment in response to repentance, precisely because His character is good, righteous, loving, and merciful.

What is the significance of the biblical depictions of divine “relenting”? What does this convey about the constancy of God’s character alongside the fact that God enters into genuine give-and-take relationships that actually make a difference to Him?

Hold Fast to Love and Justice

Scripture consistently teaches that “ ‘the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments’ ” (*Deut. 7:9, NKJV*). His character of goodness and love was supremely demonstrated by Jesus at the cross (*see Rom. 3:25, 26; Rom. 5:8*). According to Psalm 100:5, “The LORD is good; [H]is steadfast love endures forever, and [H]is faithfulness to all generations” (*ESV; compare with Ps. 89:2*). Thus, God can be trusted; He gives only good gifts to His children (*James 1:17; compare with Luke 11:11–13*). In fact, He bestows good things even on those who position themselves as His enemies.

Read Matthew 5:43–48. What does this teach about God’s amazing love? How should we act toward others in light of this teaching of Jesus?

Matthew 5 describes God’s love as perfect love. Imperfect love is the love that loves only those who love you. But God loves even those who hate Him, even those who position themselves as His enemies. His love is complete and, therefore, perfect.

Though God’s love and mercy far exceed any reasonable expectations, it never overrides or contravenes justice. On the contrary, it brings justice and mercy together (*Ps. 85:10*). Likewise, the Bible exhorts us: “ ‘Observe mercy and justice, and wait on your God continually’ ” (*Hos. 12:6, NKJV*). As another version puts it, “Hold fast to love and justice” (*Hos. 12:6, ESV; compare with Luke 11:42*).

In the end, God Himself will bring about perfect justice. Romans 2:5 teaches that His “righteous judgment will be revealed” (*ESV*). Finally, the redeemed will sing: “ ‘Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested’ ” (*Rev. 15:3, 4, NKJV; compare with Rev. 19:1, 2*).

Isaiah 25:1 proclaims, “O LORD, You are my God. I will exalt You, I will praise Your name, for You have done wonderful things; Your counsels of old are faithfulness and truth” (NKJV). How can we learn to praise God, even in bad times? In what ways can your life itself be an offering of praise to God in a way that furthers justice in your sphere of influence?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–15, in *Steps to Christ*.

“The word of God reveals His character. He Himself has declared His infinite love and pity. When Moses prayed, ‘Show me Thy glory,’ the Lord answered, ‘I will make all My goodness pass before thee.’ Exodus 33:18, 19. This is His glory. The Lord passed before Moses, and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.’ Exodus 34:6, 7. He is ‘slow to anger, and of great kindness,’ ‘because He delighteth in mercy.’ Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18.

“God has bound our hearts to Him by unnumbered tokens in heaven and in earth. Through the things of nature, and the deepest and tenderest earthly ties that human hearts can know, He has sought to reveal Himself to us. Yet these but imperfectly represent His love. Though all these evidences have been given, the enemy of good blinded the minds of men, so that they looked upon God with fear; they thought of Him as severe and unforgiving. Satan led men to conceive of God as a being whose chief attribute is stern justice,—one who is a severe judge, a harsh, exacting creditor. He pictured the Creator as a being who is watching with jealous eye to discern the errors and mistakes of men, that He may visit judgments upon them. It was to remove this dark shadow, by revealing to the world the infinite love of God, that Jesus came to live among men.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 10, 11.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is it so important to recognize that God’s glory is bound up with His goodness? How does this correct a theology of glory that emphasizes sheer power without emphasizing the love and character of God?
- 2 Have you ever questioned God’s goodness? Do you know anyone who has questioned God’s goodness because of the way those who claim to follow God sometimes act, or simply because of all the evil in the world? How did you work through that question for yourself, and how might you be able to help someone struggling with the question of God’s goodness? See next week’s lesson.
- 3 In class, flesh out the answer to Monday’s question. How does the reality of the great controversy help us understand all the evil that exists now?

“You Can’t Pass By”

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

American missionary Joanne (Park) Kim was walking to her rented apartment in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. It was the dead of winter, and the midafternoon temperature was about minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 40 Celsius).

Then Joanne saw an intoxicated man lying on the sidewalk. She had been attacked by a number of drunken men over the past year in Mongolia, and she didn’t want to stop. What if he also attacked her? She started to walk past him, but then she stopped. A small voice seemed to say, “You can’t pass by.”

Joanne struggled with the idea of helping him. “Lord,” she said, “he weighs nearly twice as much as I do. How can I help him?”

She looked around. The street was empty. No other people were in sight.

Joanne looked at the stranger again. “If I walk by, he will die,” she thought. “His body will freeze in just a couple of hours.”

She saw apartment buildings all around. Each building had a small room on the first floor for a guard, so the entryway was fairly warm. The nearest building was about 1,000 feet (300 meters) away. “OK, Lord,” Joanne said. “I’ll get this guy over there.” Putting her arms under his, she prayed for strength and pulled. Somehow, she dragged him to the building. Placing him in the entryway, she stepped back and looked at him. A new feeling filled her heart. She felt compassion and pity.

This encounter marked a turning point in Joanne’s mission work. No longer did she harbor any ill feelings toward the attackers. Instead, compassion and pity washed over her. At last, she could love like Jesus.

Joanne went on to help plant the first Adventist church in Ulaanbaatar as a pioneer missionary with a supporting mission organization from 1992 to 1998. She returned in 2017, and she now serves as education and development director for the Adventist Church in Mongolia.

Even now, drunken strangers still attack her from time to time, but her love for God and His people is unshakable. “Satan does not give up,” she said. “He knew he could wear me down. But God gifted me with the Mongolian language and a change of heart. God loves even the drunk men who were attacking me all the time, so I need to love them and help them as best I can.”



You also can participate in the mission work in Mongolia through this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering, part of which will help open a recreation center where children can grow spiritually, mentally, socially, and physically in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

Part I: Overview

Key Text: *Jeremiah 9:24*

Study Focus: *Ps. 33:5, Jer. 18:7–10, Mal. 3:6, James 1:17.*

Introduction: Throughout Scripture, God’s love and justice are intrinsic to His character. These attributes reveal His deep concern for justice and righteousness.

Lesson Themes:

1. Love and justice belong together. Although we are not used to thinking about love and justice together, throughout Scripture, true love requires justice, and true justice is driven by love. Conversely, a pretense of love without justice is lenience toward evil; and justice without love consists of cold legalism. Therefore, genuine love and justice describe God’s perfect character. He loves justice and intends to see justice practiced in the world.
2. Loving justice requires constancy. Justice is the foundation of God’s government. His actions are grounded on the constancy of the divine moral character, not on random decisions and unjust deeds. God’s justice emanates from His regularity, as He never lies, and His promises are unbreakable. While Scripture affirms God’s moral immutability, it also indicates that His actions may relationally change in response to human decisions.
3. Loving justice takes repentance into account. We find statements in Scripture about God not relenting, meaning that He does not lie. Also, passages of the Old Testament indicate that God repents, in the sense of His not bringing the expected judgment announced by Him due to human wrongdoing. God’s relenting does not mean that He lied about His judgment but that He relationally changes His actions toward people if they repent and decide to live a life of fellowship with Him.

Life Application: Considering that God may change relationally toward His people when they choose to accept or reject Him, how can we reflect God’s loving justice as we react to injustice and wrongdoing in the world?

Part II: Commentary

1. Love and Justice Belong Together.

Many people think that love and justice are mutually exclusive. According

to this perspective, one cannot be just and loving at the same time. In this view, love is lenient and precludes, or at least blurs, the due application of justice. Conversely, it is argued that justice has to be objective and dispassionate. Thus, it necessarily excludes any form of mercy and love.

However, this view is not the only (nor the best) way of thinking about the distinction of love and justice. In fact, love and justice do not form a dichotomy in the Bible but are, rather, coherently combined in the description of God's perfect character. In the biblical wholistic account of love and justice, one cannot be properly thought of without the other. A pretense of love without justice is actually unfairness/partisanship, whereas the idea of justice without love is really cold legalism. In fact, the Bible goes even a step further in the description of God's character. God does not merely combine love and justice; He actually loves justice (*Ps. 33:5, Isa. 61:8*).

The Hebrew term for justice, in Psalm 33:5 and Isaiah 61:8, is *mišpāṭ*, which conveys the idea of correct government. According to Robert Culver, while modern conceptions of democratic government separate legislative, judicial, and executive functions, *mišpāṭ* is not "restricted to judicial processes only" but actually refers to "all functions of government." From this perspective, if there is no separation of functions, government in biblical times centered primarily on the figure of the ruler rather than on law codes. Also, the ruler/judge had executive and "judicial powers." In other words, the ruler/judge not only made judicial decisions but also executed or caused them to be executed. As an example, when David appealed to God as judge in his contention with Saul, David was not only thinking in terms of a juridical decision but also assumed a judicial execution of deliverance and vindication: "let the LORD be judge, and judge between you and me, and see and plead my case, and deliver me out of your hand" (*1 Sam. 24:15, NKJV*).—Robert D. Culver, "2443 מִשְׁפָּט," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 948.

If we take this broad understanding of justice into account, to say that God loves justice seems to imply at least two important points for our study of God. First, God's justice is not merely related to law codes, but it fundamentally concerns His heart and character. Second, He loves not only the deliberation of justice but also its execution.

2. Loving Justice Requires Constancy.

If justice refers to sound government with good judgment and execution, as pointed out above, it must exclude the possibility of random or capricious decisions on the part of the ruler. From this perspective, justice requires constancy and regularity. There are two main passages in Scripture, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New Testament, that are normally used to affirm God's immutability. While the concept of

immutability is heavily loaded with philosophical assumptions in discussions about the doctrine of God in diverse traditions of Christian theology, it is safe to say that Malachi 3:6 and James 1:17 underscore the constancy of God's moral character. To put a finer point upon it, He is morally immutable or changeless.

Malachi 3 is shaped by the idea of God's justice. The chapter is introduced by the question of divine justice, in Malachi 2:17, namely, "Where is the God of justice?" In other words, what is going to happen to "every-one who does evil" (*Mal. 2:17, NKJV*)? In response to this fundamental question, Malachi 3 highlights the coming of divine judgment. "Who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?" (*Mal. 3:2, NKJV*). The judgment has in view particularly the rebellious history of God's people, but this serious message is actually intended as a call to repentance. Therefore, the tone of God's future judgment is ultimately a hopeful one.

In this context of judgment and hope, the Lord emphasizes that He does not change, and this fact is, indeed, the reason why His people are not destroyed (*Mal. 3:6*). The idea of God's changelessness is rendered in the New English Translation Bible as "I, the LORD, do not go back on my promises," which captures the notion of God's moral covenantal immutability, suggested by the context of the passage. At the same time, the emphasis of Malachi 3:7 ("Return to Me, and I will return to you" [*NKJV*]) highlights a relational and positive change of attitude on God's part, which is what He desires to do, depending on the people's repentance.

In James 1:17, the idea of divine constancy and moral immutability is also underscored. The context of James 1 indicates that temptations are not prompted by God, as He consistently and constantly gives us good and perfect gifts from above. Thus, instead of a capricious combination of temptations and gifts, He consistently offers us only gifts. As "the Father of lights," He shows "no variation or shadow of turning" (*James 1:17, NKJV*). The connection between God as the Creator of light and His constancy also appears in Psalm 136:7–9, which is part of the iterative emphasis of the psalm: "For His mercy endures forever" (*NKJV*). In these verses, the psalmist underscores the creative power and constancy of God: "to Him who made great lights, for His mercy endures forever—the sun to rule by day, for His mercy endures forever; the moon and stars to rule by night, for His mercy endures forever" (*Ps. 136:7–9, NKJV*).

3. Loving Justice Takes Repentance Into Account.

The Old Testament seems to have paradoxical statements about the repenting and relenting nature of God. On the one hand, we have passages—such as Numbers 23:19 ("God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of

man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” [NKJV] and 1 Samuel 15:29 (“The Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent” [NKJV])—that affirm God’s constancy. To put it more pointedly, the Lord does not relent. The main point of these statements is that God does not lie, which is consistent with the New Testament teaching about God in Titus 1:2 and Hebrews 6:18.

On the other hand, Old Testament passages narrate God’s relenting or repenting in the sense of His not bringing the judgment He announced against those who did evil. One of the most well-known examples is the divine mercy shown to Nineveh in the book of Jonah (*Jon. 3:10*), where Jonah himself, in the beginning of chapter 4, disagrees with God’s repenting. Jonah’s explanation of why he does not want to announce the coming divine judgment against Nineveh reinforces God’s mercy: “‘LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in loving-kindness, One who relents from doing harm’” (*Jon. 4:1, 2, NKJV*).

Jonah 4:2 contains at least three important reasons why this “relenting” on God’s part should not come as a surprise. First, Jonah himself indicates that he suspected, from the beginning, that such an outcome would happen. This anticipation of God’s mercy is the real reason Jonah fled to Tarshish. Second, his statement about God here echoes Exodus 32:14 and Exodus 34:6, 7, where Israel itself was the object of God’s repentance. Hence, well before the divine relenting regarding Nineveh, God did the same with Israel in the past. Third, this type of relenting does not mean that God lied about His announced judgments, for He explains in Jeremiah 18:7–10 that “‘the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it’” (*NKJV*). Therefore, God relationally changes His attitude toward the people if they relationally change their attitude toward Him.

Part III: Life Application

Scripture affirms God’s moral immutability, but He may change relationally toward His people when they choose to accept or reject Him. With this idea in mind, discuss the following questions:

1. How can we reflect God's justice as we react to injustice and wrongdoing in the world?

2. God repents and changes His judgment depending on the people's attitude toward Him. Is God's justice full of revenge and retribution, or does it envisage some form of restoration? Explain. How is God's repentance related to restoration?

3. God is willing to relent and restore His relationship with His people. From this perspective, how can we cultivate justice and love to restore broken relationships?

4. Have there been times when you tried to confront injustice and it backfired or went poorly? If so, how did you respond? How can you continue to pursue justice and help the most vulnerable?

5. Have you ever been treated unjustly? If so, what was the outcome of your situation? How does your experience influence the way you treat others?
