

**King's Online Bible School**  
**Doctrine 101: Learning about God**

**18. The Justice of God** (adapted from R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths*)

We usually equate justice with what is earned or deserved.

Aristotle defined justice as "giving a person what is his or her *due*." What is "due" may be determined by ethical obligation or by some prior agreement. If a person is punished more severely than his crime deserves, the punishment is unjust. If a person receives a lesser reward than she has earned, then the reward is not just.

How does mercy relate to justice? Mercy and justice are obviously different things, though they are sometimes confused. Mercy occurs when wrongdoers are given less punishment than deserved or greater rewards than they earned.

God tempers His justice with mercy. His grace is essentially a kind of mercy. God is gracious to us when He withholds the punishment we deserve and when He rewards our obedience, despite the fact that we owe obedience to Him and, so, do not merit any reward. Mercy is always voluntary with God. He is never obligated to be merciful. He reserves the right to exercise His grace according to the good pleasure of His will. He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion" (Rom 9:15).

People often complain that, because God does not distribute His grace or mercy equally on all people, He is not fair. It may seem that if God pardons one person He is obligated to pardon everybody.

Yet, we see clearly in Scripture that God does not treat everyone equally. He revealed Himself to Abraham in a way He did not to other pagans in the ancient world. He graciously appeared to Paul in a way He did not appear to Judas Iscariot.

Paul received grace from God; Judas Iscariot received justice. Mercy and grace are forms of non-justice, but they are not acts of injustice. If Judas' punishment was more severe than he deserved, then he would have something about which to complain. Paul received grace, but this does not require that Judas also receive grace. If grace would be something that is *required* from God and if God is *obligated* to be gracious, then we are no longer speaking of grace, but of justice.

Biblically, justice is defined in terms of righteousness. When God is just, He is doing what is right. Abraham asked God a rhetorical question that can only have one obvious answer: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25). Likewise, the apostle Paul raised a similar rhetorical question: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!" (Rom 9:14).

**Summary**

1. Justice is giving what is due.
2. Biblical justice is linked to righteousness, to doing what is right.
3. Injustice is outside the category of justice and is a violation of justice.
4. Mercy is also outside the category of justice but is not a violation of justice.

**Biblical passages for reflection:**

Genesis 18:25   Exodus 34:6-7   Nehemiah 9:32-33   Psalm 145:17   Romans 9:14-33