

GOD: JUST & MERCIFUL

Text: Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 4 **Read:** Romans 3:19-26

1: Recap

God created us good and in his own image (Ge 1:31; Eph. 4:24)
Adam and Eve fell into sin taking us with them (Ge 3; Ro. 5:12,18,19)
Humanity has a natural tendency to hate God and others

2: God will punish our disobedience and rebellion

As a just judge he punishes sin (Ge 2; Ro 1)
He is terribly angry about sin (Ps 2; Rev 20)

3: Isn't God being unjust?

A sinner's perspective
God's perspective

4: Can we simply depend on God being merciful?

God is merciful (Ex. 34:6-7)
But he is also just (Ex. 34:6-7)

5: Then what?

Our one ray of hope (Jn 3:16)
The whole world is accountable (Ro 3:19)
But there is a solution (Ro 3:21)

And so: *Look to Jesus in whom God's justice and mercy meet.*

Dear Congregation

What do you do if you're caught coming into the country with one ecstasy tablet in your bag? You knew it was illegal. You didn't think you had any on you. But there it is, one ecstasy tablet found in your luggage. That was the situation for one lady who was hoping to come into Australia from Europe. Apparently she wasn't a dealer. She was a user. In fact, as far as she was concerned, there was nothing wrong with it.

But she was still hoping to be allowed into the country. So her first line of defence was to question whether our standards weren't too high. Catch the hard drug traffickers, sure, but should casual users of drugs like ecstasy be put in the same basket?

Then her second line of defence was to hope that they'd let her in anyway – show a bit of compassion. Take the tablet, there's only one after all, but please let me in.

And our natural inclination in our relationship with God can be to take the same approach. God has high expectations – perfect righteousness, holiness, justice, love. And the problem is that we can't meet them. But surely that's a problem with his standard – he's set the bar too high? And after all, we're not that bad really -

we're not murders and rapists - surely God can show us a bit of compassion and turn a blind eye when it's our turn to walk through the pearly gates?

Point 1

Before we deal with those questions though, just think back for a minute over *the things we've seen so far* in this section of the catechism on our sin and misery.

We've seen from Genesis 1 how *God originally created humanity good and in his own image* - without sin, like him. He created us with some of his characteristics, Reflecting his nature. Our children are born with the characteristics of their parents – maybe dad's nose and mum's eyes, dad's hair colour, mum's build. And in the same way we were created like God spiritually. We had his holiness, his righteousness. We're relational beings - no man is an island. And we loved God, each other, and all of creation.

But then in Genesis 3 *Adam and Eve fell into sin*. There was one thing they weren't allowed to do, eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But when Satan tempted them, they ate. They were caught with their hands in the forbidden cookie jar. And so our first parents fell into sin, and the misery that came with it.

And then from Romans 5 we saw how *Adam took all of humanity into sin with him*. He was the head of his household, and we are his household. When he fell into sin, we fell into sin with him. In Psalm 51 David reminds us that we aren't sinners because we sin, we sin because we're conceived sinners.

Which means that *all of humanity now has a natural tendency to hate God and our neighbour*. Instead of being born righteous we're born sinful. Instead of being born set apart for God we're born slaves to sin and Satan. Instead of enjoying a deep intimate relationship with God we're cut off from him. Instead of being naturally inclined to love God and others we're inclined to hate them. The first chapters of Romans lay this all out pretty clearly.

Point 2

And so another thing you learn from those early chapters of Genesis and Romans is that ***God punishes sinners for not meeting his standard***. In Genesis 2, God says to Adam that if he eats from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he will surely die. In Romans 1 Paul writes, ‘The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men ...’ God punishes sinners now, and in eternity.

And it shouldn’t really surprise us. That’s also the way we run our families, our communities, our countries. We set punishments in our homes for family members that do the wrong thing. Our governments and courts set punishments for those who break the law. And as we do that, we’re only copying God’s approach to things. God punishes those who disobey him and rebel against him - and the punishment is death – physical death, spiritual death, eternal death.

We shouldn’t be surprised to learn either that ***God is terribly angry with sin and sinners***.

Those of us who are people in authority, maybe parents or bosses, are probably surprised occasionally at how angry we can get at kids or employees who simply won’t do what they should. It often doesn’t even depend on how bad the offence is, but simply the fact that it happens over and over and over again.

But if that’s the case with us, imagine how angry God must be at sin. He’s the king of creation. He’s the ultimate law-giver. His nature is the yardstick for what is good and bad, right and wrong. Imagine how angry he must get when people go against everything that is good and right and godly – everything that he stands for - and not just once, but over and over and over again, often without caring, thinking only about what they want. God is terribly angry about the sin we’re born with as well as the sins we commit personally.

You get an idea of how angry God is at sin when he threatens to destroy Israel and start again with Moses as Israel worships the golden calf. You see it again in Psalm 2 when he talks of ruling the rebelling nations with an iron sceptre, dashing them to pieces like pottery. And again in Revelation 20 when it pictures the

punishment for the devil and his followers as a burning lake of sulphur where they will be tormented day and night forever and ever – a picture of eternal death and hell.

God doesn't deal with sin lightly. Even one sin receives the ultimate punishment.

Point 3

But then, what do we do about that as sinners? In our own different ways, we are the person caught trying to come into the country with an ecstasy pill in our luggage. We are the ones hoping to enter God's kingdom with suitcases full of illegal items.

And we can try and take that lady's first line of defence. We can try and argue that God's standards are too high. *We can question his justice.* After all, we're not really all that bad are we? It's not as if we've murdered anyone or anything like that.

And people talk that way. Many non-Christians wonder how God could keep them out of heaven - if there is a heaven - because deep down they're really not all that bad.

And it gets worse – because for decades now the line between good and bad has been moving in the wrong direction. Our judges now try to let people off the hook for behaviour that would have simply been understood as terribly wrong a couple of decades ago. Now too many people consider it normal, or at worst a spontaneous response to an unusual situation.

And to compound that, for too long now we've been taught that we aren't responsible for our own actions.

Pleading that you were too drunk to know what you were doing is becoming an acceptable excuse.

But God looks at things a different way.

When God created humanity, he gave us the ability to keep his law. He created us perfectly righteous and holy. From God's perspective, humanity has no excuse.

As well as that, God is a covenant God. He often deals with things in terms of families, not just with individuals. When God establishes a covenant with Noah, and with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, it's with them

and their descendants. When Achan sins as Israel enters the Promised Land, he and his whole household die for it. And so when Adam sinned in the beginning, humanity sinned. God deals with us as part of Adam's household, as well as on the basis of our own actions. God doesn't only have an issue with Adam for his original sin, he has an issue with humanity, Adam's household.

And finally, when we break God's law, we not only break the law, but we go against everything God stands for. His law is a reflection of his nature, his character. It isn't something that he has arbitrarily put in place. It springs from the essence of who he is. We can get angry with our kids, and others, when they constantly go against the rules we put in place in our homes - because they're not only breaking a rule, their defying us and our nature from which those rules spring. But we do the same thing to God.

But that all means that pleading that God isn't being just, that he's set his standard too high, doesn't get us very far. We mightn't think we're all that bad, but we fall far short of the perfect standard of his nature. And God is a just God - his justice demands that sin be punished with the ultimate penalty, eternal punishment of body and soul.

Point 4

Accepting that then, what if we try the other approach of the person caught by customs, and just trust that God will show us a bit of compassion and turn a blind eye, after all *he is a merciful God isn't he?* If you don't get the answer you're looking for by turning to God's justice, well, turn to his mercy.

That's a bit like the favourite trick kids use if they don't get what they want from one parent. What do you do? Well you go and ask the other parent hoping for a different answer.

The only problem is that even though parents mightn't always automatically agree, the different attributes of God's nature do. *God is one, and his attributes work together*. They perfectly compliment each other. You can't play one of them off against another.

And so, it's not that God isn't merciful. He is. As he describes himself to Moses in Exodus 34 he says, 'The

LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.’ God is a merciful God. He bends over backwards to achieve a merciful outcome. He goes to extremes we can’t even begin to imagine. But on the other hand, he doesn’t do that at the expense of his justice. And so he continues in Ex 34, ‘yet he doesn’t leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the 3rd and 4th generation.’

You can’t play off God’s mercy against his justice.

God’s justice and mercy are like parallel train tracks, working together to get the train to its destination. They never work against each other, one of them trying to take the train one way, the other the other way. They always work together, even if they are different attributes of his nature.

Point 5

So where does that leave us then? We can’t plead that God is being unjust – in fact we’re the ones who are wanting him to be unjust and simply let us off the hook. And we can’t just expect him to just be merciful – God’s justice and mercy work together. Do we have any hope? And the only hope we have is if there is a solution that satisfies both God’s justice and his mercy.

And that takes us back to the end of Lord’s Day 2, and *the one ray of hope* that we heard about a couple of weeks ago - being born again by the Spirit of God. You might remember that as we looked at that, it lead us to John 3:16 and the message of hope through faith in Jesus so that we won’t perish but have eternal life – *the message of the gospel*.

And we end up at the same point today in Romans chapter 3. Verse 19 starts with God’s justice, ‘Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.’ But 2 verses later, verse 21 again offers us our one ray of hope and leads us to God’s mercy, ‘But now a righteousness from God apart from law, has been made known, to

which the Law and Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.’

The train tracks of God’s justice and mercy lead us straight to the foot of the cross. It’s at the cross that we see God’s justice and mercy come together to their full extent, and provide the solution to our dilemma. God poured the full weight of his justice and anger against sin onto Jesus, who took the full punishment for all the sins of believers upon himself. The full extent of God’s mercy is available to all who look to Jesus in faith.

We can try to excuse our sin. Or we can try and trade off God’s justice against his mercy.

Or we can honestly acknowledge to God that we have fallen far short of his perfect standard of righteousness and holiness. We can look to his son Jesus in faith. And we can have God Himself declare us to be perfectly righteous and holy in spite of our sin - just as his son Jesus is.

Is there really a choice? Sweep our sin under the carpet and pretend that Mt Everest doesn’t exist. Or honestly acknowledge it before God and watch him cast the mountain of our sin into the sea, never to be seen again.

Which approach are you taking?