

WHEN THE REF'S ARM IS UP

5th in a Series on the Character of God Called, "Indescribable"- Topic: The Holiness of God
Job 34:10-17

I'm going to beg your forgiveness as we start today, because I want to tell several sports stories this morning as illustrations. I am going to begin with one from my freshman year in college. I was on the baseball team, sort of, trying unsuccessfully to make an impression on the baseball coaches at my college and earn some playing time. But I was spending a lot of time on the bench during games. The only time I got into a game was when it was a blowout and there was no chance my ineptitude could affect the outcome. One game we were down by such a large margin that the coach let me play the last few innings. I got one at bat. It came in the ninth inning with two outs, no runners on base and us down by 12 runs. Everyone just wanted to get the game over except for me. This was my chance to show the coach something. I worked the count to two balls and two strikes. The next pitch was a fastball, very low, so low it threatened to kill some worms on the way past the plate. I let it go by, knowing it was ball three. The umpire called out, "Strike three, you're out. Game over." I couldn't believe it. That pitch wasn't even in the same zip code as a strike. I whirled around and yelled at the umpire, "Are you kidding me? That wasn't even close. How could you call that a strike?" He took off his mask and calmly said to me, "Look, it's late. I'm tired. I want to go home." He didn't even pretend to claim it was in the strike zone, he just wanted to be done. My chance at baseball heroics was over.

That was 51 years ago. I still remember it. The umpire, the baseball embodiment of justice, had cheated me out of my chance. He had not stood for justice. It didn't ruin my life. Actually I have managed to overcome that injustice and live a very happy life. But isn't it amazing how we remember even trivial injustices? Among other things the events of the past couple of weeks in our nation have reminded us that justice is hugely important to us. As we continue studying the character of God today we will look at the question of justice, which is the big focus of the book of Job. Let's look at Job 34:10-17.

GOD IS JUST

God Is the Pattern of Justice

Every parent has had at least some variation of a particular conversation with a child. The child is not getting that one thing he or she wants more than anything else in the world. The parent says no. The negotiating and whining goes into full volume, but the parent stands firm. The answer is no. Final answer. What does the child say? "But that's not fair!" What is the parental response? Life's not fair.

Why isn't life fair? I stated right up front that the premise of this sermon is that God is just. God created all that exists and he rules over it. So if he's just, why isn't life fair? It feels like it should be, but unfortunately that parental cliché is accurate. Life isn't fair. A few years back some researchers published a study they did on the subject of beauty. The study produced two conclusions, one surprising and one kind of obvious. The surprising result was that standards of beauty are not as culturally determined as we usually think they are. The people whom the subjects identified as beautiful were much the same across all cultural boundaries. That was somewhat unexpected.

But the obvious conclusion was that beautiful people were favored over those not considered beautiful. Um, you needed a research study to come to that conclusion? Sheesh, just look around. Subjects in the study were shown photos of people for a brief moment, and then asked to record their impressions of those in the pictures. They consistently formed more positive impressions of beautiful people just from that one look, than those who were not. Is that fair? Beautiful people get the blessing of being beautiful, then because they are beautiful they get the advantage of being favored by other people. Life just isn't fair.

What happens to people in their lives definitely is not fair. I remember a friend of my brother's who also became a friend of mine. After narrowly escaping death in battle in Vietnam he dedicated his life to the Lord. When he came home he was a deeply committed follower of Jesus. He dedicated himself to full-time ministry and went to seminary. Then he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. In a painfully short amount of time his life was over while he was still a young man. Life is not fair.

The central issue in the book of Job is whether God is just. What happened in Job's life doesn't seem fair. He was a godly man, the best man alive according to God. Then he was battered by tragedies and losses you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. So throughout the book the question of how this could be fair is debated. Job had friends who had good theology, beginning with the premise that God is just. Then they went sideways. They drew the conclusion that Job must have deserved the horrors that blew his life up, otherwise God wouldn't be fair.

Job defended himself because he knew he was innocent and did not deserve what had befallen him. Along the way he wrestled with how to understand this, and questioned God in the process. By chapter 34 a new friend named Elihu has shown up. He doesn't get it all right, but he's a big improvement on the other guys. He correctly takes Job to task. In Job 34:5 Elihu says, "Job says, 'I am innocent, but God denies me justice.'"

This is where Elihu rightly has a bone to pick with Job. Job was saying he was right and God was unfair to him. Elihu was correct. Job had said that. In Job 19:6-7 Job said, “God has wronged me and drawn his net around me. Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response; though I call for help I get no justice.” Wow, God had wronged him and he got no justice. If I were in his sandals, that’s how I would have felt.

In verses 10-11 Elihu says, “Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. He repays everyone for what they have done; he brings on them what their conduct deserves.” So Elihu asserted that God is just, that he judges people fairly. He gives people what they deserve. Verse 12 says it is unthinkable that God would do wrong or pervert justice.

The Hebrew word translated “justice” is *mishpat*. It shows up again in verse 17. This same word was used in Exodus 26:30 where God is giving Moses instructions for building the tabernacle. God tells Moses, “Set up this tabernacle according to the *mishpat* you were shown.” Wait, according to the justice you were shown? That doesn’t make sense. God is showing Moses building plans and he says they are “justice”? It helps to know that the root meaning of the word is “pattern.” Right, God showed Moses a pattern for the tabernacle and said, “build it like that.” But what does that have to do with justice?

It speaks to a crucial question. Just exactly what is justice? I can tell you how 2 year olds and 4 year olds define justice. Justice, to kids that age, is defined as “I get what I want.” If they don’t get it, then “that’s not fair.” The truth is that we mostly don’t get too far from that definition. Even as adults, justice, what is “fair,” comes mostly down to “I get what I want.” A more accurate definition of justice is something like “people get what they deserve.” But how do we know what people deserve? Who makes that determination?

Justice requires some standard. God is the standard. He is the pattern. He is the one who created justice. He defines it. You can know what justice is by looking at him. During the lockdown one of the things Laurie and I have done for amusement is put together a couple of jigsaw puzzles. You open the box and there are 1000 pieces. You can identify the edge pieces because they have a flat side. But where do all those other pieces go? You have a box with the picture on it, the one the puzzle will make. You can get an idea of where pieces go by looking at the pattern of the picture. You look at the *mishpat*. God is the *mishpat* that is justice. He shows you what it is.

What God does is just

This is where we have some struggles. It was where Job struggled. How could what happened to him have been fair? His friends concluded it could only be fair if Job was secretly so bad that he deserved the terrible things that happened to him. But Job knew that he, in fact, did not deserve it. So his fate didn't seem just. Unfortunately we are all going to have moments in the Job Zone. That's kind of like the Twilight Zone, only more confusing. It is that zone where, like Job, you can't make sense of it. How could God be just, doing the right thing always, and let this happen to me when it seems all wrong and totally unfair?

The answer Job gets in the book ultimately comes down to, "Job, are you the mishpat for justice? Are you the pattern? Are you the final authority on what is fair and what isn't?" Of course the answer is no. A humbled Job finally accepts that God is the mishpat for justice, and he is the only ultimate mishpat. So we have to take it on faith like Job did? To some extent, yes, But it will help us if we can have a big time paradigm shift. It's one that is hard for us to swallow, even when we realize it's true.

We get a sense of this point in Elihu's words in verses 14-15. "If it were his (God's) intention and he withdrew his spirit and breath, all humanity would perish together and mankind would return to the dust." Our lives are utterly dependent upon God. He sustains us and does so of his own volition. If he decided we should cease to exist it would happen in the blink of an eye. We only continue to exist because of God's kindness and tolerance of us.

Our paradigm says it is just and fair if people get what they deserve. We think we know what we deserve and can usually judge what everybody else deserves. But everybody, including us, usually leaves out one huge component of the justice equation, and that component changes everything. It has to do with what we deserve. To understand that we have to go all the way back to Genesis 2. Adam and Eve were warned by God not to eat the fruit from one particular tree. In Genesis 2:17 God said, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." A more accurate translation is "the day you eat from it you will die." In a sense Adam and Eve did die the day they ate from that tree because they died spiritually. But they continued to live physically. God gave them more years to live, and they lived a long time. All of those years they lived after that day were nothing but pure grace. They deserved to die physically. The punishment for disobeying God was death. They experienced that, but they had a lot of years of grace when God allowed them to live before they finally died. But because of their choice, from the moment they ate that fruit they were dead people walking.

Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. The day that a person sins that person should die. They have introduced evil into the world, and they need to die for that. Every moment they live after that is nothing but pure grace. What we need to grasp is that every day we live after we once have sinned, which happened before we can even remember, we have been under the penalty of death. At that moment, we deserved to die. That was our just reward. Every moment of our lives have been pure grace, whether that be 10 years or 100 years.

Unfortunately we assume that we deserve the grace God gives us and much more. If we deserve it, then it is not grace. Grace is undeserved kindness. We get so used to the grace of God that we take it for granted. We need a paradigm shift, and if we can make that shift we will begin to see God's justice more clearly. That shift is to see every single day that we live as a gift of grace that we do not deserve. Maybe our days do not have our ideal circumstances, but what we deserve is death. A few years back you remember I blew out a tendon in my right elbow and had to have surgery to repair it. At first after surgery you are a bit groggy and still have some anesthetic running through your system so you don't feel bad. But that wears off and your body begins to notify you that someone had taken a sharp knife and cut you open that day. They give you pain pills to numb the pain. Some people don't like them because they make them feel loopy and sleepy. I sure wish it worked that way for me. The pills they gave me were as effective against the pain as those little candies with dumb sayings on them that you get Valentine's Day. The pain hit me full force. It was unrelenting. But the pills did affect me. They had a weird effect. They made me feel wired, hyper. They did the exact opposite of what they do to most people. Because the pill wasn't helping, after a couple of hours I took another one. Zero help with the pain, but now more wired than ever. In the middle of the night, in the dark my arm is screaming at me, the pain is excruciating, and I can't even sit still. There's that moment where I asked, "Lord, these things work for everybody else. Why me? What did I do to deserve this?" But as hard as it was, as much as I would like to never have to do that again, it was an improvement on dying. Which meant that night was actually a gift of God's grace. I was not getting what I deserved.

I want you to imagine a guy who did not vote for Donald Trump back in 2016. This guy despises Mr. Trump. He criticizes everything the President does, verbally and in social media. If Mr. Trump said that tomorrow the sun will come up in the east he would find something wrong with that statement. He's downright ugly in his vicious negative comments. Somehow the President learns of this man, gets in touch with him and says to him, "I want you to find out I'm not the ogre you make me out to be. I am having a White House dinner honoring the Ambassador from Great Britain. I would like you to come as my guest." He does not deserve to be there, but he goes. But once he is there he starts complaining because his table is toward the rear of the room. He thinks he should be in

the front row. Then he criticizes the menu, when he gets his filet mignon it's not done exactly to his liking so he complains about that. We're like that guy. We don't deserve to be alive today, but we take that for granted. Even though we don't deserve that we complain if everything isn't just the way we want it to be. We forget, ***we're fortunate not to get what we deserve.***

So what if life goes sideways on us and we can't understand how God could be just and let these things happen to us? We need to remember that the fact that we are alive is pure grace. We deserved judgment, so the fact that we don't face that today is reason to give thanks to God for the grace he is giving to us, even if our circumstances are hard.

God will make all things right when he judges

Psalm 9:7 says, "The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment." In other words, God will judge. Romans 2:6 says, "God will repay each person according to what they have done." 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."

The *LA Times* once had a story that featured a man named Dave Hagler, who lives in Colorado. He worked as a referee and an umpire in many sports leagues there. One winter he was driving in snow and was in a hurry. He was not technically exceeding the speed limit, but was going pretty fast for the conditions. A police officer pulled him over and was going to give him a ticket for driving at an unsafe speed in the conditions. Hagler appealed to him, tried to talk him out of the ticket, making the point that he is a good driver. The officer was not to be dissuaded. He said if Hagler didn't like it he could contest it in court. The next baseball season in the first game of the season he was umpiring behind the plate. The first batter stepped up to the plate and Hagler recognized him. It was the officer who had cited him. The policeman looked back at him and obviously recognized him. He said, a little tentatively, "So how did the thing with the ticket go?" Hagler told him, "You'd better swing at everything."

Our choices and actions have consequences. We are going to have to answer for what we've done. We all have the sense that this is true. Somehow we know that we will be called to account for what we have done. That sense, one that many strive mightily to get away from, is given us by God. He will judge, and all of us will get what we deserve.

There are 2 crucial truths that we must always remember. The first is that ***nobody gets away with anything.*** History is an account of continual, relentless injustice. There is so much that has happened to people and continues to happen to people that is so wrong. But because God is judge we know that all of those wrongs will be made right.

Sometimes it seems like horrible people have gotten away with the things they have done, but they haven't. They will have to stand before God and answer to him for what they have done.

The second thing is that *the equation doesn't balance in this life*. The equation of justice will only balance when we take eternity into account. Have you ever been watching some game on television and turned it off because late in the game one team was so far ahead it was for all intents and purposes over, only to find out later that the team that was behind pulled off a remarkable rally and won the game? That's how life will be. There will be times when it looks like justice has lost, but in eternity God will show up and justice will win. Life right now isn't fair. That's a simple fact. It never has been throughout human history. That's because God has allowed people freedom to make choices, and we have a perverse tendency to choose evil. That creates injustice. It is a constant part of life here. But the game is not over until the Judge of all has ruled, and he will make straight everything crooked. He will right all wrongs.

JUSTICE MATTERS

It matters because without it we will despair

There is in all of us a big need for justice. We long for things to be made right. We are seeing that played out in our nation right now. People have been in the streets and all over social media demanding justice. All of the protests and demonstrations tell us that we cannot bear it when wrongs are not righted. Why all of the upheaval? Why all the protests? We want justice. We need it. We demand it. Injustice makes us indignant. It feels unbearable to us.

Mark Meynell served as the proverbial missionary to Africa, training pastors. He made a friend there who had lived in the Congo. He and his friends and family suffered terribly under a cruel regime there. He saw many horrific things happen. Finally he could no longer stand it so he and his family fled as refugees to Uganda, which is where Meynell met him. He was preparing to become a pastor. At one point after recounting the horrors that he had seen and experienced he said to Meynell, "I could never believe the gospel if it were not for the judgment of God, because I will never get justice in this world. But I couldn't cope if I was NEVER going to see justice done." Meynell says, "We in the west often recoil from God's justice for a very simple reason. We've hardly had to suffer injustice. But most people around the globe recognize that God's justice is praiseworthy and great."

It matters because without it we couldn't love God

Have you ever had a teacher, coach or boss who was unfair? I know, that's like asking if you've ever breathed in oxygen. If you're alive and breathing you've probably had one of

those. I had a teacher in high school who, for some reason, didn't seem to be very fond of me. If someone in the same time zone as me was talking in class when they weren't supposed to be, she would blame me for it. I realize in part that was because all too often I was the culprit, but there were many occasions when I wasn't but got blamed anyway. She did not treat me fairly in a number of ways. I can assure you that when I got out of her class at the end of the year it was a joyful day. I avoided her like the corona virus after that.

If God is not fair, if he is unjust, are we going to love him? Are we going to want to know him? Are we going to worship him? No way. We would despise him and avoid him. We can only love God and worship him if he is just.

It matters because without it chaos would result

When my son was in high school he played football, baseball and hockey. I coached his hockey team for part of that time. I recall one game where I saw the results of lack of justice. There was one referee that for some reason was biased against our team. Most of the refs were great and were fair, but every now and then we'd get this guy and there was a clear pattern. He called penalties against our team, a lot, but never against the other team. He repeatedly ignored blatant fouls by the other teams. In this one game there was a player on the other team who recognized that one of the strengths of our team was our goalie, that happened to be Toby. So he decided the best strategy for beating us was to harass Toby, to distract him and get him off his game. From the beginning he would skate in close to our goal, get into the crease, which he was not allowed to do, plant himself there, get in Toby's way, crowd him, shove him, and whack him with his stick. These were all illegal actions that should have been penalized, but the ref did nothing. Toby kept telling the ref he needed to stop the guy, but nothing happened. I could see what was going on and I kept yelling at the ref. In between periods I called him over to our bench and said, "You're letting that kid get away with murder. You've got to stop this." He just said, "You coach your team, Coach, and I'll referee the game," and skated away. This went on for most of the game. Finally, in the third period, Toby had had enough. The kid once again skated into the crease and planted himself right in front of Toby to block him from playing his position. Toby took his stick in both hands and slammed the kid in the back, knocking him flat on his face. The kid jumped back up and started to go after Toby to fight him. He didn't get very far. You don't mess with a team's goalie. Instantly our players jumped in to stop the kid. The other team's players rushed to defend their teammate. We were on the verge of an all out brawl before the coaches reined everybody in.

Justice was not being served. And when there is no justice, it becomes the wild west. Everybody just does whatever they can to protect their own cause and interest. If God

were not just, if he did not judge, if he did not deal with evil decisively, then evil would run rampant. The very existence of creation depends upon God's justice. Our only hope for peace and goodness and life depend totally on God's justice.

APPLICATION

MAKE AN ETERNAL CHOICE

God is just, and that means he will judge justly. We need him to judge, to set all things right. And he will do that. That's where we have a problem. Evil, even in the smallest amount, is dangerous and deadly. That means our personal evil is dangerous and deadly. God must eradicate it. He has levied the appropriate penalty against evil. He said it must die, for that is the only way to make heaven a reality. But that means we and our evil must die!

God has done an astounding thing that we cannot truly understand. He has pronounced the sentence of death on evil, and then he came into this world to take our place and suffer the penalty of our evil himself. That's what Jesus did on that cross. Jesus, the infinite Son of God, died to cover the infinity of our evil.

God is always good to us, and that means he gives us a choice. We can either choose to accept the payment of the penalty that he has made on our behalf, or we can pay it ourselves. If you have not made the choice to put your faith in Jesus and accept the payment that he made for us when he went to that cross so long ago, then by default you are choosing to pay the penalty yourself. Remember that the penalty is death. In this case it is not merely physical death, it is death forever.

If you have not made that choice I encourage you do make it today. If you have, and I know you probably have, then give thanks to God. Remember that the penalty has been paid. There is nothing left to pay. Live every day of your life as a way of thanking him.

TRUST IN GOD'S JUSTICE

We need to believe that God's justice will win. He will make everything right in the end. That is our hope. We need to remember that he is perfectly just, and we are not. Our rallying cry is, "That's not fair!" But our understanding of fair is not much advanced over a 4 year old's. God is the pattern, the standard of what is just, and we are not.

That means first that we can trust that what is happening in our lives is just and fair, even when it does not seem possible that this is so. That is the place Job had to get to, and finally did. He had to accept that God is just, even when he couldn't figure out how that

worked out in his circumstances. He trusted in God's justice. Remember that the equation of justice will not balance until God rules at the end of this world. The game of justice is not over until God has judged. We need to never forget that.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7 Paul wrote to some people who were being abused and terribly mistreated, "God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled." This is what frees us from the need to settle scores, to get even, to strike back. God will take care of them in his infinite justice. Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge: I will repay, says the Lord.'"

Please excuse one more sports story. I was playing hockey on a team down at UTC with some guys from church at the time. I was by far the oldest guy on our team, and one of the worst. In one game I picked up the puck in our end not far from the goal and was going to skate it around the goal in preparation to move it back up the ice. But there was a guy from the other team right behind me trying to steal the puck. I saw a teammate open on the other side of the rink so I passed the puck off the boards behind the net to my teammate. Just as I was passing it the guy behind me whacked me hard with his stick on my skate and knocked my legs out from under me. It was a dangerous, dirty play and it was blatantly illegal. I went down, and I was mad. This was a recreational league, there was no place for something that bad to ever happen. I popped up with the determination to let that guy have it with my stick. But as I came up I saw the referee with his arm in the area. That meant he had seen what had happened and was calling a delayed penalty. He was going to call a penalty, but hadn't stopped play yet because my team still had the puck, and calling the penalty right then would have hurt us. His arm in the air meant when we lost the puck he would stop play and send that foul offender to the penalty box where he belonged. I left the guy alone. If I'd gone looking for revenge I would have gotten a penalty and hurt my team's cause. When you are hurt, treated unfairly or unkindly or badly by someone, remember God is the referee, and he saw it. He has his hand in the air, meaning he's going to make it right. Taking our revenge on someone is putting ourselves in God's place. Never a good idea. So leave it to God, the pattern of justice, to judge.

ACT JUSTLY

Micah 6:8 says, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Our God is just, and people should see that justice reflected in us. We must always treat people fairly, regardless of their status, class, race, nationality, or gender. We should seek justice in our world, especially for those who are denied it. We should pray for God's justice to be done, ask him to act, then trust in him to do what is best.