

Is God any good at justice?

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[0 : 00] Hello, everybody. Now, if you asked people 20 years ago or so what kind of God they want, perhaps they say! God of love and tolerance and acceptance.

I think the picture's changed a little bit, though. I think we want a God of justice as well. Do you remember this?

The Grenfell Tower disaster. 72 people died. It was awful. And those families wanted justice. You might remember this as well. Three years ago, three innocent people got stabbed. And when the families found out that the attacker just got a hospital order, in their eyes, just got a hospital order.

Was that enough, they were thinking? It was a big story at the time. They wanted real justice. And we want justice. The big things are how we've been really badly mistreated.

[1 : 11] How come they got a promotion and I didn't? And I worked really hard. How come, you know, they didn't revise, but they got nines and I revised loads and I didn't get a good grade.

How come they get to cut in the traffic key when I've been sitting on the slip road patiently for half an hour? In many cases, not in all cases, but in many cases, I think we want God to be a God of justice and sort people out.

Don't we? But is God any good at justice? You might think. Maybe you think, you know, where was God in my life when that happened?

Or when that horrible thing happened to me in my situation now? I think it's the biggest objection to Christianity. You know, why is there so much suffering in the world? Why hasn't God come along for the scum out there to sort them out?

Because they always seem to get off scot-free, don't they? God, are you any good at justice? Well, the people in Malachi are asking that question.

[2 : 31] Look down at your Bible. It's chapter 2, verse 17. All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them.

Where's the God of justice? We're your people, the good people, and we're worse off than men over there. You must love those bad people then.

That where is the Lord? That where is the Lord? Look at it in the verse. You just don't get it, do you? God says. God is much better at justice than we think.

God is much better at justice than we think. The judge is coming. Have a look down at verse 1 of chapter 3. Verse 1.

The justice bringer you want, he says, is going to come.

[3 : 46] The first a messenger to prepare the way before him, and then he will come. You know, if you know your Bibles, this is fulfilled in John the Baptist. In the New Testament, very clear.

He prepares the way for the Lord Jesus to come. It's kind of like that secret service agent with his armored vehicle, and he's like, make way, make room for the president.

Except he's paving a pathway for repentance. Make way. Repent. Get ready. He's coming. And if you don't, repent.

Verse 5. Judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, perjurers, against those who deforwer laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty.

Maybe there's a part of you that slightly recoils at that. That's what God does. Deep down, we want a God like this.

[5 : 06] You know, on Jimmy Savile's tombstone, it read, it was good while it lasted. Can you see that at the bottom? It was good while it lasted.

It kind of feels like he's taunting us from the grave. I got away with it. But if he didn't repent, he has not got away with it.

And actually, that's good news. Look, if you've been abused, if you have been oppressed, if you are a family in Ukraine who've lost loved ones, you want the dirtbags out there to get justice.

And I'll put it as strongly as that. If they don't repent, they will be judged by the Lord Jesus. So you're thinking, the people in Malachi are thinking at this point, yes, woohoo, God a judgment is coming.

You're going to get the baddies. Except, a huge surprise. Now, two turkeys, right, they walk into a bar.

[6 : 20] It's not a real story. They walk into a bar. And one says to the other, oh, I just love Christmas. I love Christmas too.

What do you love about Christmas? Oh, I just love all the lights and the tree. Oh, yeah, I love that too. Oh, yeah, and I love the food. Oh, yeah, I love the roast potatoes and the turkey and the cranberry sauce.

What did you say? Oh, I love the roast potatoes and the turkey. No, I hate Christmas. The people in Malachi are turkeys wishing for Christmas.

Because God's justice is coming to them. Look at verse one again. The Bible has layers.

Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. Now, the temple is where the good people are, where they do all their good stuff. And God is coming there.

[7 : 25] And Jesus did go there. He wants to flip the tables. Do you remember that? Second time in AD 70. To flatten it completely.

And one day, at his judgment throne, the last day, to judge quite a lot of religious looking people. God's point is this.

Look at verse five again. Has layers. So I will come to put who on trial? You. On trial.

And look at that list. It's a list in verse five that basically describes the people in Malachi that we have been looking at. God is much better at justice than we might want him to be.

Here's a thought experiment. You've probably heard it before. It's quite a famous illustration really. But we want God to get rid of the evil scum in the world.

[8 : 26] But where is that line? Right? Where is that line where he's going to get rid of these people but not get rid of these people? Well, you know, put it up here. You know, obviously, you've got Hitler and you've got the Savills of this world.

You know, they're obviously gone. But then you've got, you've still got some people here. You've got, well, you've got the murderers. So you've got to get rid of those. The line comes down. And the oppressors. And then you've got the, well, you've got the greedy bankers.

You've got to get rid of those. So the line comes down again. The gang members. Okay. They've got to go. And then you've kind of still got evil people because, you know, you've got the petty criminals. And then you've kind of got the bully at school.

And then you've got people who maybe don't scan everything at the self-service checkouts. And then there are people who cut in last minute at the traffic queue. Wow.

And then you've got the gossipers. And then you've got people who have thoughts and bad thoughts. And then I just kind of bring that up a little bit because, do you know what?

[9 : 35] Conveniently, I'd put that line a little bit higher. Because I have to, don't I? We have to. When we call for justice, we want everyone worse than us to face it.

But us and the people better than us, well, we just kind of let them off. Where does God put that line? Well, the people of Malachi, maybe they will say, you know, I go to the temple and I give a pretty good sacrifice.

I'm pretty faithful to my wife. We're clean enough, right? We're not the scumbag out there. Maybe us, you know. Oh, you know, I'm not perfect.

I only tell white lies. I only use a little bit of chat GPT on my homework. I don't snap at my husband or wife much. Now, I'm one of the older staples at Bethel, you might think.

People look up to me. You know, I'm safe, right? I'm pure enough. Well, you might say, you know, I don't really kind of always have trust or love Jesus.

[10 : 48] But I come to church on Sunday. And I've kind of done a Christianity Explored course before. And I'm a really, really nice person. So I'll be okay, won't I? Okay. God is so good at justice that he puts the line at perfection.

He puts the line at all sins across the board. We've had an election this week, right? God judges the sins considered by the right, verse 5.

Adultery. No fear of God. And the sins considered sins by the left. Oppressing people. Depriving foreigners of justice. It's not overgeneralisation, but you get what I'm saying.

As much as we might like the line to be at external British niceness, he puts the line at heart level, complete perfection.

Which means none of us are safe, are we? I'm not safe. I don't think we're even consistent with the line, are we?

[12:10] I hate it when people cut in on the traffic queue when I've kind of waited. But do you know what? I'm actually the king of people who cut in, right?

I'll admit that. I just like doing it. It's easy. And when someone doesn't let me in, I'm like, when someone doesn't let me in, I'm thinking, oh, come on, you couldn't let me in there.

What are you doing that for? Sometimes, but not always. Who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can stand when he appears? That's what verse 2 says. External religiosity, British niceness, cultural Christianity doesn't come close to God's perfect, complete line, does it?

By nature, no one's clean enough for God to not just wipe away. He's better at justice than we think.

[13:17] And this is really humbling, because outside of Jesus, we're all grubby and we're all sin stains.

And I put myself in that category, okay? And we all deserve God's justice. Have you felt that more keenly today? Good.

Because that is God's word working on you. Perhaps, though, you came here already feeling quite spiritually grubby. You're all too aware of that shameful thing in your past.

About current sin struggle. It kind of feels like you're walking around with a, metaphorically, you know, with a pristine white shirt. With a stain there from your past that you just can't get out.

Always there, always haunting you. Things you just can't get past. And that sounds quite extreme, but I think we've all, if we trust Jesus today, I think we can all think of things that we're ashamed of.

[14:30] Sins that we wish that we never committed. And we see God of total justice. And we think, how will I stand?

And that is the position that we're supposed to be in. That is God's word working on us right now. God is better at justice than we think.

But God is also really, really good at grace. God is much better at grace than we think. But most of us will know that he's full of grace in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Forgiving us. Clearing our guilt. But this really hit me this week. For grubby sinners like us, there's a really, there's a richer picture here.

I want to make the gospel bigger for you this morning. In his grace, he refines us and he cleanses us. That is a different angle, maybe, than what we talk about.

[15:38] But verse 5, Jesus will burn up the dross who do not repent. But verse 2 to 4, Jesus will purify the gold who come to him.

Look down at verse 2. Look down at verse 2. For he will be like a refiner's fire or launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.

He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. The point here, fire is deadly to the dross. Purifying for the gold ring, isn't it?

And Jesus in the new covenant has a whole kingdom of priests, us, who he refines to be precious to God. You are that precious, clean gold ring refined in his eyes.

But I don't know about you, I think I actually resonate a little bit more with the purifying language of the launderer's soap. Because we're not always around refining fire, but we're around soap quite a lot, right?

[16:48] Verse 2, he scrubs us clean with launderer's soap. This is not your Tesco-owned brand, which is kind of basically safe.

It's the premium stuff. The strong stuff, the stuff with the yellow warning label on it. Don't get it near your eyes, it's really dangerous.

Use gloves, it could burn you. Because that's what we need for the stain of our sin. The deep stain, and that is what Jesus is for us.

Because he was so clean. Spiritually so clean inside and out. But he stepped into the consuming fire of God's wrath at the cross.

He became the dross that we were supposed to be. So that we could have his purity. Our justice on him.

[17 : 51] His purity on us. And that is wonderful, deep grace, isn't it? I think it's easy to know that our guilt, our guilt has been crossed off a balance sheet.

And the debt is gone. Forgiven. But harder to not feel the shame from the dirt of our sin. Do you see a difference?

Still very easy, even for someone who knows the debt's gone, they're forgiven to still feel quite grubby before God. Do you ever feel that? And you start the day with that white t-shirt again. But you sin and you feel like you get a mark. And you do a big sin and it's a really big one with beetroot juice. It just won't come out. You try to scrub it up and you reach for the being better soap. No. It doesn't work. What else is there? The forget it soap. No. No. It's not gone. What about the comparing myself to other soap?

[19 : 04] No. It's still there. You can stand before God feeling forgiven, but just full of dirt. Do you feel like damaged goods?

Do you feel unworthy? Do you feel like the stain? Do you feel like the stain's never going to come out? Do you feel like the stain's never going to come out? Do you feel like the stain's never going to come out? this morning because Jesus comes with that deep once for all clean that makes you pure in him.

A shower on the outside and on the inside. No matter how big you mess up, that sin that might feel like beetroot juice, Jesus says, come to me and I will completely vanish it away because I've got the strong stuff. I am the strong stuff. Maybe we look at Christians who've fallen and even though they've repented and they are believers, we kind of put a black spot on them.

They might put a black spot on them. But in Christ, if they've repented, they are clean and they don't have to feel shame. Perhaps you woke up from the shame from yesterday's sin, still caked in mud all over you, but you're going to give up like that. You can't make progress knowing that that sin is still there and it's dirty. In Christ, we are forgiven and we are clean before him. That's how he sees us. That is your new status in Jesus. Clean. And more than that, what we now do is clean. Have a look at verse 3.

Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord as in days gone by as in four years.

[21 : 19] Oh, God can't be that impressed with what I offer him, can he? Surely what I do for him is never really quite good enough as a Christian. Outside of Jesus, that is true. Outside of Jesus, all of our deeds are filthy rags.

In Christ, what does this verse say? Acceptable. I think grandparents are kind of good at this. It doesn't really matter what their grandchildren do, they always seem to be really positive about them. Oh, he's a good boy really, isn't he? She's just got spirit. It's a little bit like that with God, except he's not pretending our service is better than it is. Through Jesus, we are actually clean. We are viewed with no dirt. So that prayer that you thought maybe wasn't really impressive when you prayed in community group or wherever it was, he sees that and he loves it.

Clean. Clean. Maybe you just were a bit late with that apology. You've got a heart to apologise. Maybe it wasn't delivered perfectly. Clean. That really, what feels like insignificant act of service, that maybe you think, oh, well, this is all I can manage at my age or whatever. God sees that. Clean. Clean. Perfect. Wholehearted. We need to believe this. This passage is quite jarring, isn't it? Because point one, we looked at total justice and now we've looked at total purifying grace. It is a contrast. And maybe you think, can we have one without the other? Can we have both? And maybe our world doesn't really think so.

[23 : 28] This is that line thing, you know. Our world does set these arbitrary lines where we should enact justice. And if you're over the line, well, you're cancelled and you're other. And if you're under the line, well, you're not perfect, but we'll just let you off. Do you know what? That's neither true grace or true justice. Because one is always at the expense of the other, isn't it? Now, either you have graceless self-righteousness, you're unforgivable, but I'm okay, or slack injustice. Now, we'll just let you off, even though you're not good enough.

The gospel of Jesus means complete justice to deserving sinners and complete grace for all who trust in him. All because he took their justice, our justice, at the cross. It is a just act.

And now he can do total justice and total cleansing. One of my friends recently said that he was telling someone about Jesus. And his reply was this. So you're telling me that someone like Jeffrey Epstein can get to the end of his life and repent and believe in Jesus, and even he would still go to heaven?

Well, if he doesn't repent, total justice. And it would be better than we think, the same we all deserve. If he repented, Jesus can take his scum, our scum, and become dross for him.

But the gospel is almost scandalous, isn't it? But oh, how we need it. Because we need Jesus to take our scum and scrub us clean. Is God any good at justice? Yes. If we're trusting in Jesus, the wonderfully freeing thing, actually, is that we don't have to worry about the injustice in the world. Because God will do something about it. He will. And we can know that he's for us and he loves us. And that we are clean, even though we don't deserve it, because of what Jesus has done.

[26 : 11] No matter who we are, we all need Jesus. And we all need his cleansing to be ready. Let me pray.

Lord God, you are a God of justice. And we thank you because we do cry out for justice.

And we thank you that you can also justly be a God of grace for us. And we thank you so much that you sent your son to purify us, that we are clean, that we can't stand in front of your judgment throne by nature, just by ourselves. Lord, we need the Lord Jesus. Thank you so much for him. We pray that in his name. Amen.