

Questions of Justice

Nahum 1:1–14; Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 9–11

Studies in the Heidelberg Catechism #8

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LET’S also turn to the sermon notes page where the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 4, questions and answers 9–11, are printed. As is our custom, let’s read responsively these

questions:

Q. But doesn’t God do man an injustice by requiring in his law what man is unable to do?

A. No, God created man with the ability to keep the law. Man, however, at the instigation of the devil, in willful disobedience, robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts.

Q. Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?

A. Certainly not. He is terribly angry with the sin we are born with as well as our actual sins. God will punish them by a just judgment both now and in eternity, having declared: “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.

Q. But isn’t God also merciful?

A. God is certainly merciful, but he is also just. His justice demands that sin, committed against his supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty—eternal punishment of body and soul.

The climactic ending of the movie, *Unforgiven*, shows the protagonist William Munny, played by Clint Eastwood, standing over the antagonist

Little Bill, played by Gene Hackman. William Munny has just killed half a dozen men in a saloon and injured Little Bill. Now as he looks down the barrel of William Munny's shotgun, Little Bill, the town sheriff and zealot, says, "I don't deserve this, I was building a house." After ten years of mourning for his wife's unexpected and underserved death, after coming to town to kill two cowboys who cut up a prostitute, after seeing his best friend Ned dead and propped up in front of the town jail after being beaten by the sheriff, William Munny says—as only a Clint Eastwood character can—"Deserve's got nothing to do with it." Bang! Life isn't fair; it's unjust.

It often feels this way, doesn't it? Life is unfair; there is no justice. What about God? If life is unfair, does this mean God is unfair? That's what our Catechism deals with in Q&A 9–11.

Is God Unjust?

Is God unjust? This is what question 9 asks: **But doesn't God do man an injustice by requiring in his law what man is unable to do?** Why does it ask this? Remember question 4 said God requires of us a perfect love of God and our neighbor. Question 5 said that instead of love, we are inclined by nature to hate God and our neighbor. Were we as a species created this way? No, but question 6 said we were made in the image of God

to know God, to love him, and to live in fellowship with him. But as Q&A 7–8 said, because of Adam’s Fall we are totally unable to do any good to save ourselves. So we pick up in answer 9 that God **created man with the ability to keep the law**. In the Garden **man, however, at the instigation of the devil, in willful disobedience, robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts** (Q&A 9). If you inherit \$1 million dollars but squander it on beer, then your children suffer the effects you brought upon them.

Let me put this in the context of answering your non-Christian friend’s objection that it is unjust for God to punish us as a race and he or she as an individual for Adam’s sin or that it is unjust to be required to love God and neighbor perfectly if it is true that we are born totally unable because of Adam’s sin. What are they really saying? “God is not fair.” So how do you respond? You need to love your friends enough to tell them the true story of humanity’s creation and fall; which opens the door to explaining the story of God’s love in Jesus Christ. These are the same people who are willing to see how someone else’s vote affects everyone else when it comes to ballot measures, for example. What if I vote against a proposition asking for money to build a college but it passes by 51%? What those 51% did affects me.

Remember, if it is not fair to be punished for Adam's sin, then it is not fair to be saved by Jesus.

So Is He Just?

So is he just? Absolutely. **Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished? Certainly not** (Q&A 10). Our Scripture this evening from Nahum illustrates the fact that God is a God of strict justice. The Assyrian Empire's capital city, Ninevah, had received the prophet Johan's message a generation before, repented, and put their trust in the Lord. But Nahum came a generation later to pronounce justice for their wickedness once again. Look at the list of his attributes: he is **jealous**, he is **avenging**, he is **wrathful**, he **takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies**, he **will by no means clear the guilty** (vv. 2-3). Look at the descriptions of how he executes his justice: **His way is in whirlwind and storm, the clouds are the dust of his feet, he rebukes the sea and makes it dry, he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers, the mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it** (vv. 4-5). Listen to the message: **Who can stand before his**

indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him (v. 6).

Will God permit such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished? Look at how answer 10 says because of Adam's original sin in us as well as our actual sins,

He is terribly angry with the sin we are born with as well as our actual sins. God will punish them by a just judgment both now and in eternity, having declared: "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.

This is what should frighten us to the core about our unsaved loved ones and this is what should love us to humble ourselves before his face to change their hearts like Ninevah before!

How Just?

"But aren't you're overstating the case, pastor! After all, my God is a God of love. God so loved the world, right? He loves everyone and has a wonderful plan for their lives." Of course he's merciful. That's what question 11 asks: **But isn't God also merciful?** And it begins by saying, **God is certainly merciful.** One of the greatest false doctrines of the modern American church is making God's mercy greater than his justice.

Theologians, pastors, and people have acted like the old crooks in the days of

gold mining. The miner would find a gold nugget, bring it to the buyer of gold, and unbeknownst to the miner, have one side of his scale heavier than another so that the gold wasn't worth as much as it really was. That's happened with God. His love has been weighted more than his justice.

Our Catechism corrects us. Besides justice we confess **but he is also just** and this means that **his justice demands that sin, committed against his supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty—eternal punishment of body and soul.** There is a just proportion between sin and the punishment based on the one being offended, which is an infinite God.¹ This is why Nahum describes the infinite justice of God in this way: **But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness (v. 8).**

This is so important. When we reflect upon how relentless the justice of God is in pursuing our sins, we begin to see just how relentless the mercy of God is to us in Christ. Just like in the English poem, “The Hound of Heaven,” God’s mercy relentlessly seeks us and finds us who are mired in the inescapable justice of God because of our sins. Amen.

¹ Bastingius, 17 col. 1.