

b. Love

(1) Analysis

(a) Scriptural Data

We've been studying the moral attributes of God and have concluded the section on God's holiness. Today we want to turn to the other facet of God's moral character, and that is God's love. If God were simply a God of justice and not a God of love then we would be in deep trouble! So we are very grateful to be able to study not only the holiness and justice of God, but also God's wonderful love. Let's look at some scriptural data concerning God's love.

First of all, the Scriptures indicate that *God's very nature is loving*. God is essentially loving. 1 John 4:7-21:

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the

love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love. We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

Notice that according to John the love of God is not something that is adventitious to God – a contingent property that God simply happens to exhibit. It belongs to the very essence of God – God is love. So love is of the divine nature and is manifested toward us. So God is not only a God of holiness and justice, but he is also a God of love. As one author has said, “Thank God for God!”

Secondly, let look at three characteristics of God’s love.

First, *God’s love is unconditional*. That is already indicated in the passage that we just read. God loves us not because we loved him, but because he first loved us. So God’s love is not contingent upon our loving him first. His love is unconditional.

But this isn’t a New Testament peculiarity. This is also true of God’s love expressed in the Old Testament toward his people Israel. Look at Deuteronomy 7:7-8 where God describes why he chose Israel as his own. He says,

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you,

for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

Here the Lord says it is not something about Israel that made them particularly lovable or worthy. It is simply God's sovereign choice. He simply has chosen them. He loves them. There wasn't anything about Israel that made it particularly worthy of God's love. God's love is unconditional.

This same truth is taught in the New Testament. For example, look at Ephesians 2:4-5. Paul says, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." Here Paul says even when we were spiritually dead in our sins, God loved us with this great love, and then made us alive in Christ. This is an expression of his grace, his unmerited favor toward us. It is God's unconditional love.

Finally, look at Titus 3:3-5, which is one of the richest passages in the New Testament, I think. There Paul says,

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

Notice what Paul says here. The goodness and loving kindness of God is exhibited toward us not because of deeds of righteousness that we had done but simply in virtue of his own mercy. It is simply an expression of the unconditional love of God. The word here for loving kindness is *philanthropia* from which we get our word “philanthropic.” It is the will or the love of God toward people. God loves people. Therefore, he has sought to extend his grace to us and save us. So the first quality that we want to highlight of God’s love is its unconditional nature.

Second, *God’s love is immutable*. It is changeless. God is not going to withdraw his love from you at some point in the future.

Jeremiah 31:3 speaks of God’s unchanging love. There the Lord says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” So God is not going to get tired or fed up with us and withdraw his love. His love will not grow old and stale. It is an everlasting love that he has extended to us.

Finally, *God’s love is universal*. It is not extended just to some persons, but it is universally extended. John 3:16, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Notice that the object of God’s love here is not his people. It is not the church. It is not the elect. It is “the world.” It is the world of unbelieving people that God loved so much that he sent his only Son to die for them. This is a universal love that is extended to every person that God creates.

So God’s love is unconditional; it is immutable; it is universal. God’s love is a peculiar type of love which the New Testament authors refer to as *agape* love. This is not the ordinary sort of love

that human beings exhibit one toward another. This is a word that is used to describe God's love, which is this unconditional, immutable, universal love that is extended to humanity. God's character is such that he is as loving as he is holy. Neither of these can be compromised. They are equally attributes that belong to the very essence or nature of God. God is as loving as he is holy.

This, of course, leads to a great paradox. It means that God loves the sinner just as intensely as he hates his sin. God hates his sin because it violates the holiness of God. Yet, God loves the person who is perpetrating and guilty of that sin. Romans 5:8 says the following: “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . . while we were yet enemies Christ dies for us.” This is the remarkable thing about God's love – it is extended not toward those who are redeemed, who are his people, who have sought his grace. It is extended to the enemies of God – to people who are sinners and who have their faces opposed to God. It is those whom God loves so much that he sends Christ to save them.

We don't understand this kind of love. We think surely there must be something about us that makes us lovable that would prompt God to love us. So we tend to portray unsaved people as little lost lambs that are innocently straying from the fold of God, and God reaches out to bring back these little lost lambs wandering from the fold. We don't understand that in the scriptural view, we are not innocent lost victims. We are hateful rebels who have opposed God and who shake our fists in his face in opposition to him. That is why Paul refers to us as enemies of God. When we were enemies of God, Christ came and died for us. Yet that is the

tremendous truth in this paradox. As sinful and opposed to God as we are, as unworthy of his love as we are, nevertheless God loves us just as intensely as he hates our sin.

So it is the love and the justice of God together which prompt his redemption and which motivate us to seek God and to find him. I remember very well as a non-Christian when I first heard the Gospel of Christ, I was overwhelmed by the message of God's love. The thought that the God of the universe could love a worm like Bill Craig down there on that speck of dust called planet Earth just overwhelmed me. It staggered me to think that the God that created the entire universe could love me. Yet at the same time, I realized that, as a sinner whose heart was black, I stood under the condemnation and the wrath of this holy and just God who loved me. Together these brought me to Christ. The love of God drew me, but the justice and holiness of God impelled me, into Christ's arms. The love and justice of God work together to bring people to Christ.

(b) Systematic Summary

A number of contemporary philosophical theologians have sought to reduce the content of God's moral character to His *agape* love. Jordan Wessling has dubbed this claim the Identity Thesis. The thesis is that "God's love is identical to His moral goodness," such that "God possesses no moral attribute that is not essentially and most fundamentally a matter of love."¹

We have seen that, biblically speaking, justice as well as love belongs to God's righteousness. But what sort of justice is this? Theories of justice may be broadly classified as either *retributive* or *consequentialist*. Retributive theories of justice hold that punishment is justified because the guilty deserve to be punished. Consequentialist theories of justice hold that punishment is justified because of the extrinsic goods that may be realized by punishing wrongdoers, such as deterrence of crime, sequestration of dangerous persons, and reformation of wrongdoers. Retributive theories are often said to be retrospective, imposing punishment for crimes committed, whereas consequentialist theories are prospective, aiming to prevent crimes from being committed.

Retributivism may be further distinguished as either positive or negative. While negative retributivism holds that the innocent should not be punished because they do not deserve it, the essence of retributive justice lies in positive retributivism, which holds that the guilty should be punished because they deserve it. What distinguishes retributivism as a theory of justice is the positive thesis that punishment of the guilty is an intrinsic good because the guilty deserve it. The intrinsic goodness of punishment of the guilty does not preclude that there are also extrinsic goods that might be achieved by giving people their just desert. But what ultimately justifies punishment is that it is the just desert of the guilty.

In the Bible God is described as a positive retributivist “who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34.7). In the biblical view, the wicked deserve punishment (Rom 1.32; Heb 10.29), and the Bible ascribes to God retribution (Heb. *gemul* Is 59.18; *neqamah* Jer 50.15; 51.6; Grk. *ekdikēsis* Rom 11.9; *avtapodoma* Rom 12.19) for sins, so that God’s justice must be in some significant measure retributive.² The God of the Bible is not just a benevolent father figure but also the impartial Ruler and Judge of the creation, responsible for maintaining its moral order.

Indeed, it is plausible, I think, that retributive justice belongs essentially to God. The more central and prominent an attribute is in the biblical picture of God, the stronger the case for taking it to be an essential attribute of God, rather than accidental to Him. It is hard to think of an attribute more central and prominent in the biblical picture of God than His righteousness, which comprises His justice. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18.25). “Is there injustice (*adikia*) on God’s part? By no means!” (Rom 9.14). It would have been inconceivable to the biblical authors that God might act unjustly.

Kevin Kinghorn, an Identity theorist, disputes that justice belongs to God’s essence. For God, existing alone sans creation, would not exhibit retributive justice in intra-Trinitarian relationships: “because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could never wrong one another, retributive justice would never be operative.”³ He concludes, “God’s attribute of justice is not essential to God’s nature in the way that his attribute of love is essential. God’s justice is only needed in the world (such as ours) where there are imperfections and shortages. God’s essential nature is therefore not just.”⁴

But this objection is misconceived. God can have the property of giving every person his due without the existence of created persons. Indeed, God can be essentially such that He punishes

every guilty person, whether any such persons exist. Kinghorn is right that sans creation God is not wrathful, just as He is not wrathful in possible worlds in which created persons never sin, so that wrath is not an essential property of God. But God, though wrathless, is in such circumstances still essentially righteous and perfectly just.

In any case, in relation to created persons the God of the Bible exhibits retributive justice. Wessling notwithstanding, there is no incompatibility between God's valuing the flourishing of people and valuing friendship with them, even though He sentences them to their just desert with no expectation of reform. Retributivism is perfectly compatible with God's ongoing love for those He punishes, even the damned in hell, just it is possible for a judge personally to love and forgive someone brought before his bar, even as he declares him guilty and sentences him to severe punishment. God can personally will the good of sinners and desire their union with Him without waiving the demands of retributive justice. In short, God's giving the guilty their just desert does not preclude His loving them.

During the first half of the twentieth century, under the influence of psychologists and social scientists, retributive theories of justice were frowned upon in favor of consequentialist theories. Fortunately, there has been over the past half century or so a renaissance of theories of retributive justice, accompanied by a fading of consequentialist theories,⁵ so that the Christian theologian working within the mainstream position need not be diverted by the need to justify a retributive theory of justice.

It is striking that proponents of the Identity Thesis tend to endorse, explicitly or implicitly, a consequentialist theory of divine justice. For they insist that God's sole purpose in punishing wrong-doers is reformatory, rather than retributive. So, for example, Kinghorn says that God's administration of justice will ultimately be for the

same reason that we need rules of law in the first place, namely, the “benevolent goal that people flourish.”⁶ Given a consequentialist theory of justice, God’s love suffices to motivate His harsh treatment of sinners aimed at their reformation. Kinghorn declares, “God’s expressions of wrath are not vindictive or emotional outbursts aimed at the punishment of unrighteous people as an ultimate goal.”⁷ This characterization of retributivism is, of course, a straw man, for the retributivist would agree that God’s expressions of wrath are not vindictive or emotional outbursts but may nonetheless be aimed at the punishment of unrighteous people as the ultimate goal. God’s wrath is an affective expression of God’s retributive justice, so that the issue is not ultimately wrath but the nature of God’s justice.⁸ Kinghorn’s endorsement of consequentialism is clearly in view when he affirms, “Expressions of divine wrath must . . . be for the ultimate, benevolent purpose God has of drawing people into relationship with himself, thereby bringing fullness of life to them.”⁹

Not only is pure consequentialism at odds with the biblical view of divine justice, but consequentialism seems, in any case, ill-suited to serve as the justification for divine punishment because God’s judgement is described in the Bible as ultimately eschatological. The ungodly are “storing up wrath” for themselves for God’s final day of judgement (Rom 2.5). Punishment imposed at that point could seemingly serve no other purpose than retribution.¹⁰ For all hope of reform is gone. But the damned are punished nonetheless because they deserve it.

Wessling defends God’s ongoing punishment of the damned aimed at persuading them “to start down the path of spiritual transformation” but only at the admitted expense that one “is willing to allow for post-mortem opportunities for salvation in hell,”¹¹ a consoling but unbiblical view (Mt 25.46; II Thess 1.9). Moreover, Wessling’s view either must deny God’s omniscience, so that He continues to pursue a pointless action that only

perpetuates suffering, knowing that it won't do any good, or in effect transforms hell into purgatory and results in the restoration of all things, a universalistic doctrine that is both unbiblical and condemned by the Church.¹²

Kinghorn struggles to justify God's punishment of the damned on consequentialist grounds as an act of His benevolence aimed at their reformation. He recognizes that "We can use our God-given freedom to place ourselves eternally under God's wrath by decisively rejecting his offer to participate in the fellowship of self-giving love."¹³ Indeed, at some point the opportunity for repentance will be gone: "the time for possible repentance will have passed."¹⁴ So why does God continue to punish people beyond that point? Kinghorn's answer seems to be: He does not! With no consequentialist justification for punishment, God ceases to punish the damned in hell, though they may (mistakenly) think themselves to be under God's wrath.¹⁵ Rather He simply leaves them alone. Hell, then, is not a punishment for sin, rather "Hell is just a natural consequence of life apart from God."¹⁶

Wessling calls this position "the *natural consequences view*."¹⁷ It must not be confused with a consequentialist view of divine justice. On consequentialism God does punish the damned in hell for their sin with a view towards some extrinsic benefit. But on the natural consequences view, hell is not a punishment of sin flowing from divine justice but simply a natural consequence of sin. Curiously, Kinghorn offers no biblical justification for so remarkable a thesis as the claim that hell is not divine punishment for sin. To the contrary, Wessling points out that the natural consequences view "certainly does not sit well" with texts like I Cor 11.27–31; II Pet 2. 1–16; Rev 16), which speak of divine wrath, judgment, condemnation, and punishment.¹⁸ In any case, on Kinghorn's natural consequences view, it remains mysterious why God does not simply annihilate the damned and put them out of

their misery, rather than allowing them to suffer interminably and undeservedly what Kinghorn calls “*the worst possible situation for humans*.”¹⁹

In general, the natural consequences view of God’s response to sin is biblically inadequate.²⁰ Certainly sin is regarded in the Scriptures as self-destructive in its consequences, but God’s response to sin is not reducible to permitting sin’s natural consequences. Rather God imposes justly deserved punishments in response to sin. Already in the story of the fall in Gen 3, the words “you shall surely die” (*môt_ tāmût_*) occur repeatedly in the legal collections of the OT condemning criminals to death.²¹ Victor Hamilton notes that all of the *môt_ tāmût_* passages in the OT deal with either a punishment for sin or an untimely death as the result of punishment, so that in the story of the fall the expression clearly conveys the announcement of a death sentence by divine or royal decree.²² In the NT the forensic language is pervasive, especially in Paul’s treatment of condemnation and justification in Romans. James Dunn concludes, “that God’s righteousness towards the peoples he has created includes wrath and judgment as well as faithfulness and salvation is clearly implicit in . . . Rom. 1.16–18 and 3.3–6.”²³ Those who deny that *dikaiosynē* is a forensic term pay insufficient attention to Rom 4.4-5, “where the forensic background is clear in the allusion to the legal impropriety of a judge ‘justifying the ungodly’.”²⁴

Conclusion

In sum, it is unbiblical and misguided to try to reduce the entire moral character of God to His love. God’s moral perfection is most adequately conceived as His righteousness, which is a complex attribute comprising both His *agape* love and His retributive justice, both of which are plausibly essential to God.

¹ Jordan Wessling, “Divine Goodness and Love,” in *T. & T. Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology*, ed. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner (London: T. & T. Clark, 2021), p. 148. A sufficient condition of this thesis is said to be that “a complete understanding of God’s love, plus a complete description of the relevant circumstances (excluding additional moral premises), would in principle enable one to determine each actual or possible item of behavior (including behaviors of thought and character) that God would judge that He should do, is acceptable to do, or should not do.”

² On the Hebrew words and their significance, see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, vol. III, trans. John T. Willis and Geoffrey Bromiley, s.v. “*gāmal*,” by K. Seybold (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), sec. II.2.c *In Statements Concerning Divine Judgment*; *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, vol. X, trans. Douglas W. Scott, s.v. “*nāqam*,” by E. Lipiński (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999). When used by the prophets in connection with certain verbs like *sālam* (to repay), *gemûl* has the sense of “payment, reward, recompense, or revenge.” According to Seybold, Psalms of individual lament like Ps 28.4; Lam 3.64, in “complete harmony” with the prophetic oracles like Is 59.18, offer prayers for *gemûl* as “a judicial and retributive intervention of Yahweh.” The verbal root *nqm* expresses the notion of revenge, in Yahweh’s case in accord with retributive justice, the *lex talionis*. Similarly, “We speak today of ‘getting one’s just reward,’ meaning that one is getting due punishment” (Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37-52*, Anchor Bible 21C [New York: Doubleday, 2004], p. 439). The Greek words are not only abundantly used in the LXX to translate the relevant Hebrew terms but are used in the NT to indicate, among other things, divine retribution and vengeance (*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2d ed., ed. Moisés Silva, vol. I: A-Δ, s.v. “*didōmi* (*avtapodidōmi*, *avtapodoma*, *avtapodosis*)” and “*dikē* (*ekdikeō*, *ekdikēsis*)” [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2014]).

³ Kevin Kinghorn with Steven Travis, *But What about God’s Wrath? The Compelling Love Story of Divine Anger* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2019), p. 30.

⁴ Kinghorn, *What about God’s Wrath?*, p. 35.

⁵ See, e.g., Mark D. White, ed., *Retributivism: Essays on Theory and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Michael Tonry, ed., *Retributivism Has a Past: Has It a Future?* Studies in Penal Theory and Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Ironically, some theologians, unaware of this sea change in theories of justice, denounce in the strongest terms a God of retributive justice (Stephen Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* [Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007], pp. 97–98), not realizing that their objection to the justice of penal substitutionary atonement depends on a view of divine justice as retributive, lest God punish the innocent on consequentialist grounds.

⁶ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 73. A problem here is that, as Garcia notes, flourishing or well-being is a type of non-moral good, and it seems wrong to treat moral value as simply a function of non-moral value (Garcia, "Moral Perfection," pp. 221, 229). She explains, by contrast, that on Jorge Garcia's virtue theory the whole set of moral virtues can be reduced to one over-arching virtue, viz., genuine concern for the good of persons, so that the love of persons is both the root and key component of all the virtues (p. 229). Thus, divine moral perfection consists in "exemplifying perfect love" (p. 230). Perhaps Kinghorn means to endorse such a virtue theory, since he is thinking of persons' good in terms of their relationship to God. Unfortunately, such a theory still neglects divine justice.

⁷ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, pp. 142-43.

⁸ See Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, pp. 1-21. Biblical expressions of God's wrath, he explains, are meant to convey both God's anger at injustice in our world and His actions to set things straight, to settle accounts, to visit punishment upon evildoers. What Kinghorn seems to fail to appreciate is that the reason that God's anger is not an "uncontrolled outburst" is because it is righteous anger, that is to say, guided by justice. Therefore in His role as Supreme Judge, God is, *pace* Kinghorn, most definitely like "a judge in a courthouse, suspending his personal feelings in order to act objectively" (p. 5). In denying that God's acts of wrath are motivated by righteous anger, Kinghorn forgets that it is *righteous* anger, i.e., anger that is guided by divine justice that is at issue.

⁹ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 80. God's wrath "is intended by God to lead us in some way toward reconciliation with him. That is, divine wrath is a prodding of some sort, designed to lead us to repentance and eventual reconciliation" (pp. 88-89).

¹⁰ The Christian consequentialist could say that punishment in hell does have a consequentialist justification, namely, the sequestration of the wicked from the community of the redeemed, just as hardened criminals are removed from society. But since God could achieve this end by simply annihilating the damned, the consequentialist will need to find some non-retributive reason for God's preserving them in existence.

¹¹ Wessling, "Divine Goodness and Love," p. 152.

¹² See R. T. Mullins, "Response to *Love Divine* by Jordan Wessling," paper presented at the meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 19, 2021, in San Antonio, Texas. Mullins errs, however, in thinking that "You cannot have an ultimate defeat of evil if you have a bunch of damned people in hell continuing to engage in a sinful rebellion against God." *Au contraire*, in the biblical view of things God's defeat of evil consists precisely in His punishing the wicked.

¹³ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 148.

¹⁴ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 150.

¹⁵ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 145; cf. pp. 139, 142. Kinghorn inconsistently says, "They have become the kind of people who experience all of God's actions as acts of wrath instead of as acts of love and care and faithful prompting" (p. 145). For on his view, God has ceased all such loving actions toward the damned, since He has ceased to press upon them the truth about themselves.

¹⁶ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 145.

¹⁷ Wessling, "Divine Goodness and Love," p. 151.

¹⁸ Wessling, "Divine Goodness and Love," p. 152. Kinghorn fails to take due cognizance of the passage he himself cites, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests (*menei*) upon him" (Jn 3.36).

¹⁹ Kinghorn, *What about God's Wrath?*, p. 147. I find incredible the fatuous claim by some like C. S. Lewis that God's allowing the damned to persist in their misery is actually an expression of divine benevolence.

²⁰ See Jay Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), pp. 11–12, who shows, against those who think of death as merely the natural consequence of sin, that God's response to sin is punitive judgment. See more broadly the classic treatment in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* [1834] (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1998), pp. 146–233.

²¹ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), p. 211.

²² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 173–74).

²³ Dunn, "New Perspective," pp. 64–65

²⁴ Dunn, "New Perspective," p. 64. See also Rom 5. 12–14, where the distinction between death as a consequence of sin and death as a penalty for sin becomes crucial in Paul's thinking. Death from Adam to Moses was a consequence of sin, but after the giving of the law it became as well a penalty for sin.