#### Lecture 3: Holiness and Justice:

This Lecture is from the Teaching Series *The Holiness of God*.

#### About the Teaching Series, *The Holiness of God*

The Holiness of God examines the meaning of holiness and why people are both fascinated and terrified by a holy God. This series closely explores God’s character, leading to new insights on sin, justice, and grace. The result is a new awareness of our dependence upon God’s mercy and a discovery of the awesomeness of His majestic holiness. Dr. R.C. Sproul says, “The holiness of God affects every aspect of our lives—economics, politics, athletics, romance—everything with which we are involved.”

#### Message Transcript

If we look at the period of the eighteenth century on the American frontier, we notice a recurring motif in the preaching during the Great Awakening—a sort of dual emphasis. On the one hand, the message of the preachers was that man is very, very, very bad and that God is very, very, very mad. This was an emphasis on the sinfulness of man and the wrath of God, what some have called a “scare theology” that dominated that period.

Then in the nineteenth century we saw a dramatic reaction against that kind of preaching, leading to a message that man isn’t quite so bad, and God’s not really quite so mad. The emphasis was on the love of God and the goodness of man.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a response to that reaction on the continent with the advent of a theology called “crisis theology.” It was called “crisis theology” because it borrowed the term from the Greek word krisis, which means “judgment.” And these theologians said, “If we’re going to take seriously the biblical portrait of God, we must once again take seriously what the Bible says about the wrath of God.”

#### The “Shadow Side” of God?

There were some extremists in that group who said that what we see in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament at certain times and places, is an expression of something that is irrational in the character of God. In other words, they said, “Yes, we do see unavoidably and unmistakably a manifestation of the anger of God in the pages of the Old Testament, but that anger is not so much a manifestation of God’s righteousness or of His holiness as it is a manifestation of a defect within God’s own character.”

Believe it or not, I’ve read some theologians that speak about the “shadow side” of Yahweh, saying that there resides within God the element of the demonic. This demonic aspect of God shows itself by sudden, unprovoked manifestations of a whimsical, capricious, arbitrary anger. Some of the passages that are in view would include a narrative that we read in the book of Leviticus, which I’ll read briefly for you.

#### Nadab and Abihu Consumed

At the beginning of the tenth chapter of Leviticus, we read this account: “Now Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers and put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:1–2).

Now in this understated, terse description of the death of the sons of Aaron, it seems to indicate for us an example of the swift and capricious manifestation of God’s wrath. When I read this, I try to read between the lines, and I ask myself, “How did Aaron react to all of this?” Imagine it.

You remember earlier in the Scriptures the elaborate ceremony that God ordained when He consecrated Aaron as the high priest of Israel. God ordered the minute details of the design of the garments that were to be worn by the high priest, that were designed for glory and for beauty. And then we could imagine how Aaron felt when he saw his own sons consecrated to the priesthood.

Here are these young priests who do something—and we’re not exactly sure what it was—but somehow they came to the altar. They did as young clergy will often do. They try a little experimentation and innovation. They play some almost adolescent-type pranks as they’re fooling around in their job in a sense of immaturity. And without warning, and without rebuke, as they offer this strange fire on the altar, God strikes them dead instantly.

Can you hear Aaron? He goes to Moses and he says: “What’s going on here? What kind of a God is it that we serve? I’m devoting my entire life to the ministry and to the service of Yahweh, and what are the thanks that I get? Like that, He takes my sons for a small transgression. What kind of a God is this?”

Listen to what Moses said: “Moses then said to Aaron, ‘This is what the Lord spoke of when He said: “Among those who approach me I will be regarded as holy; and in the sight of all the people I will be honored”’” (Lev. 10:3). And then we read these words: “And Aaron held his peace.”

You’d better believe Aaron held his peace. When the Almighty came down and said: “Look, Aaron, I know that this is crushing to you, that I have taken the lives of your sons, but do you remember when I established the priesthood? Do you remember, the day I set you apart and consecrated you for that holy task, that I said there are certain principles I will not negotiate with my priests? I will be regarded as holy by anyone who dares to presume to minister in my name. Before the people I will be treated with reverence.” And when God spoke, Aaron shut up.

#### Uzzah Struck Dead

There are other occasions like that, aren’t there? One of the most blood-curdling stories in the Old Testament is the story of Uzzah, the Kohathite. You all know the story of Uzzah. It’s the story of the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant. Remember that the Ark of the Covenant was the throne of God. It was the most sacred vessel in the Holy of Holies, and it had fallen into the hands of the Philistines. Then, through a series of amazing incidents, it had been returned to the Jewish people and kept in safekeeping until the appropriate time had come for the Ark of the Covenant to be restored to its place in the sanctuary. David ordered a celebration and called for the Ark of the Covenant to be transferred into the city, and the people lined the streets. They danced and sang as they saw the procession of God’s throne before them.

We are told that the Ark of the Covenant was transported by virtue of being placed in an oxcart. And the Bible tells us that as the cart was moving down the road, the Kohathites, one of whom was named Uzzah, were walking along beside it, protecting it, and watching over it. And in the midst of the procession, suddenly one of the oxen stumbled, and the cart began to teeter and to tilt. It looked as if this holy vessel of Israel was about to slide from the oxcart and fall into the mud and be desecrated. So instinctively, involuntarily, Uzzah stretched forth his hand to steady the Ark, to make sure that this throne of God would not fall into the mud.

And what happened? The heavens opened, and a voice came down saying, “Thank you, Uzzah.” No, as soon as Uzzah touched the holy Ark of God, God struck him dead.

I remember reading a Sunday school curriculum in one of the denominations I used to work with. It came from our headquarters, and I looked at passages like this, and it said: “Now we understand that these kinds of stories that we read in the Old Testament, like Uzzah and Nadab, like God’s destroying the whole world with a flood—men, women, and children—of God’s ordering the herem, telling the Jewish people to go into the land of Canaan and to slaughter all of the inhabitants of Canaan—men, women and children—that this can’t possibly be a manifestation of the real character of God. We have to understand these stories in the Old Testament simply as ancient, primitive, pre-scientific, semi-nomadic Jewish people who interpreted the events they saw in light of their own peculiar theology. Probably what happened was that Uzzah had a heart attack, and he died, and the Jewish writer attributed the cause of his death to an unmerciful expression of this vicious wrath of God.”

In other words, it was unthinkable to the authors of this curriculum that God Himself could actually have anything to do with the death of Uzzah. Yet, if we look carefully at the Old Testament and see the history of the Kohathites, I think the answer is made apparent to us.

#### More Polluted Than Dirt

You remember that in the Old Testament, the twelve tribes of Israel were given certain tasks and certain allotments of the land. The tribe of Levi was set apart for God as the family that would be responsible for the priesthood, and the matters of the Temple and education. Within the tribe of Levi there were certain other major families, and each family was given a particular task. Now Kohath was one of the sons of Levi, and God separated the family of Kohath for a specific task (Num. 4:1–20). Their job, their whole reason for being, their life’s vocation, was to take care of the sacred vessels. They were trained and disciplined from childhood with all of the prescriptions and meticulous details of the law of God about how these sacred objects and vessels were to be treated. The one absolute, non-negotiable principle that every Kohathite had drummed into him from the time he was a child was this: never, ever touch the throne of God. God said, “If you touch it, you die” (Num. 4:15).

In the first place, we wonder why in the world the Ark was being transported in an oxcart. It was to be transported on foot. There were loops at the edge of the throne, through which stays were inserted to make sure that no human hand touched the throne. But they were in a hurry, and they put it in the oxcart. And they’re going down, and Uzzah did the unthinkable—he touched the throne of God.

But we say: “So wait a minute, why did he do it? His motive was pure. He was trying to preserve the throne of God from being desecrated by the mud.” But the presumptuous sin of Uzzah was this: he assumed that his hands were less polluted than the dirt. There was nothing about the earth that would desecrate the throne of God. The earth was lying there on the ground doing what God has called earth to do—being dirt, turning to dust when it’s dry and turning to mud when it’s mixed with water. It obeys the laws of God day in, day out, doing exactly what dirt is supposed to do. There is nothing defiling about the earth. It was of the hand of man that God said, “I don’t want it on this throne.” In a word, Uzzah broke the law of God, and God killed him.

#### Marcions All over the Place

Still it seems, doesn’t it, that this is a manifestation of cruel and unusual punishment? If you look, for example, in the Pentateuch and see the list of capital crimes that are set forth in Israel, there are over thirty offenses for which God commanded the death penalty among the Jews—not only for first-degree murder, but also for homosexual acts and adultery. If a child was unruly in public and sassed his parents, he could be put to death. It was a capital crime for a Jewish person to go to a fortuneteller. The theologians look at that and say: “How primitive, how bloodthirsty, how severe. That can’t possibly be the word of God, particularly in light of the New Testament’s spirit of mercy and love.”

One of the fascinating footnotes of church history is the historical incident that provoked the formal compilation of the Bible as the canon of sacred Scripture. Remember this is a book made up of many separate books. There are twenty-seven books in the New Testament. These individual epistles and gospels were written early, circulated in the church, and recognized and functioned as Scripture. But nobody bothered to put them together in one binding and say, “This is the Bible,” until a man by the name of Marcion came along and produced the first formal edition of the Bible—the first canon of Holy Scripture.

It was a very strange canon. The Old Testament was absent, as were most of the Gospel materials, and just a few remarks from the Apostle Paul were comprised in this canon. Marcion’s working principle was this: any reference to the God of the Old Testament, Jehovah, couldn’t possibly be sacred Scripture because Jesus, in the New Testament, reveals a different deity from that explosive, hot-tempered, ill-willed deity that thundered from Sinai in the Old Testament.

Have you ever wondered about that? I hear it today all the time. There are Marcions all over the place saying to me, “I like the New Testament, but that God of the Old Testament is more than I could handle.” When we compare the Old Testament to the New Testament, the Old Testament seems severe.

#### Cosmic Treason

I’ve had help in dealing with this from the writings of an important theologian who is very controversial in Roman Catholicism. His name is Hans Küng. In one of his earlier and most important writings, written in German under the title Rechtfertigen and translated to English under the title Justification, Dr. Küng deals with this very question of the seeming injustice of God’s wrath that we find in Scripture, particularly in the Old Testament. He makes the point that the real mystery of iniquity, the real puzzle is not that a holy and righteous God should exercise justice. What is mysterious about a holy creator punishing willfully disobedient creatures? The real mystery is why God, through generation after generation, tolerates rebellious creatures who commit cosmic treason against His authority. Did you ever think of it like that?

Küng goes on to say that, even though there are thirty-some capital offenses in the Old Testament, this doesn’t represent a cruel and unusual form of justice at the hands of God. It already represents a massive reduction in the number of capital crimes. Remember the rules that were set forth at creation, when God, the omnipotent ruler of heaven and earth breathed into dirt the breath of life and shaped a creature in His own image. He gave that creature the highest status on this planet and the greatest blessing and gift, which He did not owe them at all—the very gift of life—and stamped His holy image on that piece of dirt, and gave them life. And He said, “The soul that sins shall die.”

All sin in creation was viewed as a capital offense. And it was not that this punishment would be death sometime after you’ve had your threescore and ten. The terms of creation were, “The day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Now I know people look at this and say that the text is saying there that the day the transgression takes place, we suffer spiritual death. But that’s not what God said. It may be true that man suffered spiritual death the day he transgressed the law of God, but the terms of creation were: “The day that you eat, you die biologically. It’s over.”

Is there anyone who could convict a holy, perfectly righteous creator, who out of sheer mercy creates a creature and gives him all of this blessing? Is there anything wrong with God extinguishing a creature who has the audacity to challenge His authority to rule His creation?

Have you ever stopped to consider what is involved in the slightest sin? In the slightest sin, I am saying that my will has a right that is higher than the rights of God.

It terrifies me in our culture that people do things like abortion and say they have the moral right to do it. If I know anything about God, I know God has never given anyone the moral right to do something like that. I shudder to think of what will happen when a person stands before God and says, “I had the right to do that.” Where did you get that right? Even the slightest sin—never mind a heinous sin like abortion—defies the authority of God, insults the majesty of God, and challenges the justice of God. We are so accustomed to sinning and so careful to justify our disobedience that we have become recalcitrant in our hearts. Our consciences have been seared, and we think it no serious matter to disobey the King of the universe. I call it cosmic treason.

#### Gracious Forebearance

As Dr. Küng points out, instead of destroying mankind in the moment of that act of revolt and rebellion against His authority, God reached forth and extended His mercy. Instead of justice, He poured out His grace. The history of the Old Testament is the history of repeated episodes of the manifestations of God’s gracious forbearance and merciful forgiveness towards a people who disobeyed Him day in, day out.

Küng essentially said: “I don’t know the secret counsel of God. I can’t read the deity’s mind. But I wonder if the reason we find periodically in Scripture this swift and sudden exercise in justice is that perhaps God finds it necessary to interrupt His normal pattern of longsuffering, forbearing, grace, and mercy to remind us of His justice.”

God Himself complains that His forbearing mercy is designed to give us time to repent, but instead of repenting we exploit it. So we come to think that God doesn’t care if we sin, or even if He does care there’s nothing He can do about it.

I saw a young man once defy God, screaming to the heavens: “If you’re up there, strike me dead!” A man challenging the Almighty like that—I didn’t want to look. But I saw his dead body the next day, and I’ll never forget it. We become so accustomed to God’s normal patterns of grace and mercy that we not only begin to take it for granted, we begin to assume it, to demand it, and then if we don’t get it, we’re furious.

#### “Anybody Else Want Justice?”

This morning I spoke at Dallas Theological Seminary from a passage on the New Testament where Jesus spoke to this very theme. I used my favorite illustration of this. When I was a young college teacher, I had the task of teaching 250 freshmen in a college “Introduction to the Old Testament.”

On the first day of class I had to give out the assignments, and I had to be very careful about what the requirements were because they’ll twist them any way they can to get out from under them. And I said: “Look, we have just a few little term papers here, three to five pages, or two to four pages—short little papers—four of them. If you don’t turn them in on time you get an ‘F’ on the assignment, unless you were confined to the infirmary or have a death in the immediate family.” I had to spell that all out for them. I said, “Does everybody understand?” “Oh yes, we agree,” they responded. So I said, “The first one’s due September 30.”

On September 30, 225 students diligently came forward with their term papers. Twenty-five of the students were standing there shivering and shaking in fear, and they said: “Oh, Dr. Sproul, we didn’t get our papers done. We didn’t budget our time. We didn’t make the transition from high school to college. Please don’t give us an ‘F.’ Let us have a couple days extension.” I said: “Okay, I’ll let you have it this time, but don’t let it happen again. Remember now, next month I want those papers here on time.”

Then October 30 came. Two hundred students came with their term paper. Fifty of them didn’t have their term paper. I said, “Where’s your term papers?” They said, “Oh, professor! Everybody’s term papers were due this week, and this week was homecoming, and we were busy with floats and all that stuff. Please give us one more chance.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll give you a two-day extension.” And you know what happened? They began to sing spontaneously, “We love you, Prof. Sproul, yes we do.” I was the most popular professor on campus until November 30.

On November 30, 150 students came with their term papers. The other hundred walked in like they were going down the street for a loaf of bread. They were casual and relaxed. I said, “Johnson?” He said, “Yes, sir?” I said, “Where’s your term paper?” He said, “Hey, hey Prof., you know? Don’t worry about it, I’ll have it for you in a couple of days.” I took out the black book, and I said, “Johnson?” He said, “Yes?” I said, “F.” “Ewalt, where’s your paper?” “I don’t have it, sir,” he replied. I said, “F.” “Cunningham, ‘F.’”

About that time someone in the back of the room shouted out—you can guess what they shouted—“That’s not fair!” “Patrick, did you say that,” I asked. He said, “Yes.” I said, “You said, ‘That’s not fair?’” And he said, “Right.” I said, “Do I recall that you didn’t turn your paper in on time the last time?” He said, “That’s right.” I said, “Okay, if you want justice you’re going to get justice,” and I wrote “F” for both. I said, “Anybody else? Anybody else want justice?”

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to understand the difference between justice and mercy. The minute you think that God owes you mercy, a bell should go off in your brain that warns you that you’re no longer thinking about mercy. By definition mercy is voluntary. God is never obligated to be merciful to a rebellious creature. He doesn’t owe you mercy. As He has said, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (Rom. 9:15).

#### God Is Never Unjust

I’ll close with this: a holy God is both just and merciful—never unjust. There is never an occasion in any page of sacred Scripture where God ever punishes an innocent person. God simply doesn’t know how to be unjust. I thank Him every night that He does know how to be non-just; because mercy is non-justice, but it is not injustice.

So I’ll leave you with this. When you say your prayers, don’t ever ask God to give you justice. He might do it. And if God were to deal with us according to justice, we would perish as swiftly as Nadab and Abihu, and Uzzah, and Ananias and Sapphira in the New Testament. But we live by grace, by His mercy, and let’s never forget it.