

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
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Your Relationships with God
The Relationship We Often Fear and Avoid: Judge-Accused

Psalm 7:6-16 (NIV)

6 Arise, Lord, in your anger; rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God; decree justice. 7 Let the assembled peoples gather around you, while you sit enthroned over them on high. 8 Let the Lord judge the peoples. Vindicate me, Lord, according to my righteousness, according to my integrity, O Most High. 9 Bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure—you, the righteous God who probes minds and hearts.

10 My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. 11 God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day. 12 If he does not relent, he will sharpen his sword; he will bend and string his bow. 13 He has prepared his deadly weapons; he makes ready his flaming arrows.

14 Whoever is pregnant with evil conceives trouble and gives birth to disillusionment. 15 Whoever digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the pit they have made. 16 The trouble they cause recoils on them; their violence comes down on their own heads.

Psalm 9:7-10 (NIV)

7 The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. 8 He rules the world in righteousness and judges the peoples with equity. 9 The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. 10 Those who know your name trust in you, for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.

Romans 3:9-26 (NIV)

9 What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. 10 As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

13 “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” 14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” 15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know.” 18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Romans 4:18-5:2 (NIV)

18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” 23 The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

5 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.

[Slide 1] *Opening*

Good morning church! I have an admission to make: I'm not very good at marketing. Consequently I often forget to say things that might help people get more out of these sermons. For instance, each week we post a copy of my sermon on our church website. [Slide 2] It's usually up there by Monday or Tuesday on the "sermons" page, along with a link to the recording and a copy of the slides. I mention that because sometimes, like today, the notes for my message contain a lot of references to the passages from Scripture that support the various things that I am saying. Those references may appear on a slide, or I might mention them in passing, but I usually don't read them in order to keep the sermon at a manageable length. But they are available in the posted notes so that you can do some Bible study on your own, to see for yourself what the Scriptures say about the topic of the day's message. Doing so would be a great way not only to check up on your pastor, but to deepen your own spiritual growth and your knowledge of what the Scriptures teach.

[Slide 3] *Review*

In this series, we're exploring what it means to have a personal relationship with God. Christian faith is built upon the foundation that God is personal, not impersonal; and that God is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit eternally living in perfect unity and love for one another. We understand that out of that love God chose to create a universe so that he could have a people who would be loved by him and would know him and love him in return.

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The Bible gives us ten relational images that together form a complex of ideas by which we may understand our relationship to God. So far we've looked at the first of those images: the foundational image that underlies all of the other images is that of Creator-Creature. We've seen that there are *two fundamental categories of existence*: (1) God, and (2) the visible and invisible creation. God is the Creator of all that exists, and we are a part of that creation.

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Like everything else God created, we are finite and limited. However, what distinguishes us from the rest of creation is that human beings bear the image of God. We share characteristics that are also possessed by God: (a) the capacity to reason and imagine; (b) the ability to respond, and to act in accordance to a moral standard; (c) the capacity to form meaningful, loving relationships with others; (d) the ability to govern oneself and others; (e) the ability to create significant ideas,

products, and artistic works; (f) the ability to communicate with others; and (g) the knowledge of oneself as distinct from others (self-awareness).

So from our very first relational image of God we can see that God's purpose in creation was to have a people with whom he could live in a loving relationship. That is still his purpose. But the fulfillment of that purpose requires that we know him, and for that, we need the other nine relational images to fill out our understanding of who God is and who we are in relation to him.

[Slide 6] *Introduction*

Today we are looking at the second relationship we have with God: *Judge-Accused*. It is a relationship that we often fear and try to avoid, for it carries weighty consequences, consequences that are quite literally a matter of life and death; indeed of eternal significance. But as I have mentioned previously, if we omit one of these ten relational images presented in the Bible, we will misunderstand and misrepresent God as he truly is. The second image is an essential and critical piece of the complex of images that show us what it means to have a personal relationship with God.

[Slide 7] *God the Judge*

Earlier in our service we read from Psalms 7 and 9, as well as from Romans 3 and 4. These passages declare what is both assumed and proclaimed throughout the Bible—that God is the judge to whom every person is accountable, and before whom every person will stand to answer for his or her life and for his or her sins. Indeed, the plot of the entire biblical narrative is the unfolding development of the spread of sin and God's actions as the one who must judge humanity for what we have done that brought destruction into the good world that God created.

When we combine these two images of God as Creator and God as Judge, we see that the creation includes a moral order as well as physical and spiritual aspects. There is a moral framework that is inherent in creation, a necessary aspect of human existence—as I just mentioned, it's part of the image of God in us, after all, the ability to respond to God and our responsibility to answer to him.

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Since God has created everything that exists, including the moral order which is part of the fabric of creation, God himself is therefore the standard of judgment. His nature determines the measurement for what is just or right or good. Furthermore, God is the only one with sufficient wisdom and knowledge to determine what constitutes a violation of the order he has made. As Creator, when God judges people for their actions (or angels), it is precisely because moral evil

constitutes a breach in the order of creation, a perversion of the intended purposes and existence of what God made.

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Let me tell you why this is so important. Since God is the judge of the whole earth, to whom everyone must answer, then *we cannot know God rightly without understanding him as judge*. It is true that some have misunderstood or misrepresented God as a judge—probably most of us have fallen into this trap at one point or another in our lives. But we must not let that prevent us from understanding and representing him rightly.

Now, if I *only* know God as a judge (and this usually means thinking of him as someone who severely punishes those who sin), one of two things will be the likely result. Either (a) I will refuse to follow him, believing him to be intolerably mean and unworthy of my devotion; or (b) I will follow him out of fear, and never understand his love. Neither of those options brings me closer to God, and neither relieves me from my guilt, because neither of those two views of God is true.

But if I do not know him as judge at all, if I insist that God is not a judge, or if I refuse to consider what it means to relate to God in his capacity as judge, then I will never understand the seriousness of sin, nor the concept (and the need) of righteousness. And I will seriously misunderstand what it means to know God, to have a personal relationship with God.

[Slide 10] *The foundation of the moral order*

You see, the biblical depiction of God as a judge involves more than simply being the one who punishes evildoers. God is the judge of all because his character and nature is the foundation for the moral order in the universe. God's person is not only the basis for righteousness (what constitutes being right), but the foundation for the very concept of right and wrong, good and evil, true and false.

All human ideas of what constitutes the good and the right and the true (ethics) must thus be measured against God's established moral order, which is what it is because God is the Judge. Our personal or cultural notions of what is morally acceptable are not an adequate basis for determining what constitutes right and wrong. They could reflect God's moral order, if they are based upon his character and nature. But they could also simply reflect corrupted human nature and our own self-centered preferences. (Witness the proliferation of laws enacted primarily to secure one political party's hold on power in Congress.)

Violations of God's moral order are therefore not inconsequential matters, as if we were simply comparing different opinions about what is acceptable. Violations of God's moral order are matters of the greatest consequence, for they

corrupt the good creation which God has made and introduce chaos, disorder, and pain into it. They damage that which God made and the people whom God loves.

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One of the reasons that we bristle at the notion that God is our Judge is that we have become so accustomed to sin, we assume that it is normal. We consider sin “no big deal,” when in actuality, it is a cancerous blight on this universe and everyone and everything in it. Sin is not simply a matter of “making a mistake.” Rather, sin mars God’s creation, and spoils that which God values; it rips the very fabric of the universe and threatens to destroy the integrity of what God has made. Sin is an act of rebellion and spite (like spitting in God’s face), and the destruction of what is good and beneficial for people.

But when we understand that the God who created this universe is also the judge of his creation who put in place a moral framework by which the universe was meant to function, then we can start to see why sin is, in fact, a very big deal, and why it is crucial to recognize how it affects our understanding of God and our relationship to him.

[Slide 12] *Understanding God as Judge*

So let’s look at what it means to understand God as a judge. Understanding God as a judge means recognizing these truths about him. And by the way, there are numerous references in the New Testament to Christ as the Judge, so we cannot dismiss this idea on the grounds that it is only in the Old Testament.

(1) *God is perfectly righteous.* He is absolutely opposed to evil (Deuteronomy 32:4; Psalm 5:4-7; 92:15). There is no common ground between God and wickedness, no justification that allows sin to be excused or ignored. God’s judgments—his determinations of what ought to be, what is acceptable, and what the consequences of actions will be—are just, perfectly equitable, and in accordance with the righteousness of his character (Genesis 18:25; Psalm 7:11; 67:4; 96:10, 13). They reveal and manifest his righteous character (Revelation 16:7; 19:2).

(2) *God is supremely and incomparably wise.* He cannot be fooled. He cannot be mistaken in his judgments (Galatians 6:7-8).

(3) *God loves justice and hates wickedness.* Justice and righteousness are not arbitrary or changing theoretical constructs but personal commitments, extensions of his being (Psalm 11:4-7; 33:5; 37:28; 45:6-7; 89:14). Evil and wickedness are incompatible with who God is, and therefore are incompatible with his purposes and desires for his creation. They are not alternative opinions about

what is good; they are, by definition, not good—they bring harm, not benefit, to people and God’s creation.

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(4) *God is perfectly faithful in his judgments.* God’s judgments are neither arbitrary nor capricious, but reflect both his wisdom and his righteousness (Psalm 19:9; 98:9). His integrity is unimpeachable: all that he does is in accordance with his character. He is not able to be bribed, nor does he show partiality (Deuteronomy 10:17).

(5) *God is the executor of his judgments.* He is faithful to execute his judgments as he has promised. They are not empty threats, boasts, or posturing; what he decrees he will certainly bring about (Psalm 9:7-8, 16; 103:6; 105:7; Romans 2:2-6).

(6) *God is the judge of the whole earth.* His judgments are absolutely final and authoritative. There is no other “court of appeal”: there are no other judges to whom one may go. Everyone must answer to God (Acts 17:30-31; Romans 14:10-12).

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(7) *God is Judge forever* (Psalm 9:7-8). This does not necessarily mean that God will be actively involved in making determinative judgments forever (though we don’t know what life in the next age will involve, so it is possible). Rather, in the biblical understanding of a judge, his status is that of a ruler. The picture of God as the Judge indicates that he will rule forever and that his rule will reflect his righteous character—his kingdom will be characterized by righteousness and justice.

(8) *God’s judgments include both retributive and distributive justice.* He is the one who declares the just penalty for transgressions against his moral law, and punishes accordingly (Psalm 7:6-16). He is also the one who establishes a righteous order on the earth, in order to provide for a safe and secure society where the weak, defenseless, and oppressed are protected from harm (Psalm 9:9-10; 10:12-15; 68:5). Justice thus has a double edge to its sword: God’s judgments upon the wicked establish justice for the righteous (Hebrews 6:10; Revelation 11:16-18). His punishment of the wicked brings reward and protection for the righteous.

(9) *God is a compassionate and merciful judge,* who takes no delight in punishing the wicked (Exodus 34:6-7; Psalm 135:14; Ezekiel 18:23, 32).

[Slide 15] *Understanding myself as the “Accused”*

If God is a Judge, how do I relate to him?

Understanding God as Judge means that I must understand myself as *the accused*. He is not simply the Judge of all in general, but he is my judge in particular. I have been indicted before a holy and just judge for having violated the order of his creation, for having damaged that which he made, and for rebelling against his rule. I stand guilty before him because of my sins (Psalm 51:3-4). I am unable to deny the accusations and I cannot escape the verdict. I face the just penalty for my sins, which is God's wrath, the result of which is eternal condemnation and separation from God (Romans 2:5-6; Revelation 20:12-15).

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But that is not the only thing that the Bible insists about God as our judge. The gospel announces good news of salvation *because God is our judge*. Paul's language in particular uses forensic terms, courtroom language, to describe our situation before God and his work in reconciling us to himself. The gospel announces the possibility of pardon and justification through identification with Christ, who died for us and paid the penalty for our sins.

In order to fully grasp the significance of justification, I need to appreciate and understand three things: (a) the significance of my sin; (b) the certainty and depth of my guilt; and (c) the consequent judgment of condemnation for my actions. Paul makes it very clear for us in Romans. We have all sinned. That sin renders us guilty before a holy God, the judge of the whole earth. His wrath will be poured out on us all—unless we are justified by faith in Christ.

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Justification is more than forgiveness or pardon. It is more than having my sentence commuted. It is nothing less than full restoration to righteous standing—a declaration that I am righteous on the basis of my faith in Christ, who died in my place and for me (Romans 3:21-24; 4:21-25; 5:1; 8:1, 31-34; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21). The authoritative declaration of God the Judge, whose verdict is unassailable and beyond appeal, is that I have been acquitted by reason of the sacrifice of Christ—my faith in the blood of the Lamb is the basis for my right standing before God. There is no possibility of being justified by being good, for I am not innocent and I cannot atone for my own sins. The only possible way to be justified is by being united to Christ by faith.

Since faith in Christ is the basis for my right standing with God, I can ignore the voices of condemnation that assail me, whether they come from outside accusers, from Satan, or arise within my own heart. If I am a believer in Jesus Christ, one of his followers, I can dismiss those voices, for they do not represent

the voice of God the Judge, who has declared me to be righteous because I am in Christ and his righteousness has become my own (Romans 8:31-34).

[Slide 18] *If God is the judge of the whole world . . .*

If I understand that God is judge, then I also understand that I am not the only one who will answer to God for my actions—all people everywhere will also answer to him, and his judgment will be perfect. This means that I can rest in his ability to right all wrongs that appear to go unrequited on this earth. I am assured that no one is getting away with evil. I can also trust that he will reward those whose faithfulness to Christ was neither adequately acknowledged nor repaid in this life (Deuteronomy 32:25; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 6:10; 10:30). And I can also trust that his judgment will be both righteous and merciful in cases that confound my ability to explain God's actions. Abraham's rhetorical question holds a great promise of comfort: "*Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?*" (Genesis 18:25). The implied answer is, "*Of course he will.*" We can trust that he will; his judgments are faithful, true, and altogether righteous.

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Understanding God as judge also allows us to comprehend his purposes for human beings and human society. We know that righteousness is based on God's character, which is perfectly good. So we refuse to tolerate or be content with evil, knowing it to be contrary to God's good intentions for people (Psalm 94). We realize that we are called to pray for and work for the establishment of righteousness in the earth (Matthew 6:10).

Furthermore, we understand that God's nature and his expressed will are the only adequate standard for moral righteousness and justice, rather than human systems of law, cultural norms, abstract principles, reason, or personal preferences and opinions. Therefore, to the extent that God's ways may be implanted in a people or culture, or incorporated into legal and governmental systems and ethical structures, we seek to work toward that end, so that the kingdom of God may find expression within our culture (Micah 6:8; Galatians 6:9-10).

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The history of the church has seen great examples of Christian leaders, missionaries, pastors, and ordinary believers who have embraced this understanding and worked toward the goals of incorporating God's righteousness into human society. A few notable examples would include the work of William Wilberforce in ending the slave trade in England; William Carey fighting to overthrow the practice of widow-burning in India; Martin Luther King, Jr. working to bring about civil rights legislation for African-Americans; and many

current efforts, such as efforts to end human trafficking, rescue people trapped in prostitution, prevent ethnic cleansing and genocide, and establish religious freedoms for those suffering persecution for their faith.

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Whether or not human systems reflect God's righteousness and justice, we choose to live according to his standards rather than those of the culture and systems around us (Acts 4:19-20). We are his people, and we live differently, because we know him as the Judge and we are committed to seeking his kingdom above all else.

[Slide 22] *Responding to God the Judge*

How then should we—those who are the accused—respond to God, our judge? Here are some important starting points to consider as you go through your daily routines this week.

(1) *I acknowledge his judgment as authoritative and final*: I am what God says I am, and I stand under his sentence of guilt justly condemned. I am not innocent. I need not pretend that I am or imagine that my sin does not matter.

(2) *I confess my sin*: that is, I agree with God and publicly announce my agreement that he is right and I am wrong (Psalm 51:1-4; Romans 2). I do not try to excuse my sins or to minimize them in my own mind. I call them what they are, and I repent from living as if they were acceptable.

(3) *I live in the awareness of my justification*, its cost as well as its results. I place my trust fully in the cross of Christ as the only adequate payment for my sins. I live thankfully, not taking his death for granted, but regarding God's promise that I am acquitted more certain than my awareness of my guilt or my feelings of shame.

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(4) I determine to *live circumspectly*, to conduct myself as one who is aware that I must answer to an almighty God for my thoughts, actions, attitudes, beliefs, values, choices, and decisions (1 Peter 1:13-17; 2 Corinthians 5:10-11).

(5) Consequently, I *value what God values* and *choose what he chooses*. I follow his ways so that my life is characterized by doing what is just, being merciful, and walking humbly with God. (Micah 6:8).

(6) I *decline to take vengeance*, choosing instead to allow God to take vengeance on those who do evil, including those who do evil that brings direct harm to me or my loved ones (Romans 12:19-21; Hebrews 10:30).

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(7) *I praise God for his righteous judgments*, and take my stand with him rather than being swayed by sentimentality and popular opinion as to what is good or just or right.

(8) *I trust in his capability to reward and punish perfectly*, since he is not only wise but just.

(9) I embrace the task of advancing the kingdom of God by *living in accordance with God's will*, and by *advocating and working for justice* that reflects God's nature and ways.

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If today's message has left you troubled, don't dismiss it and walk away. You need to lean into it, as young people say today. Yes, it hurts to hear about my guilt before God, to know that he is my judge, that I must answer for my sins. But the path to freedom from that guilt goes straight through God's courtroom. So embrace it. And be sure to come back next week for Relationship #3.

[Slide 26]

Transition to communion

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]