

# KNOWING GOD

## STUDY 2: GOD IS RIGHTEOUS AND JUST

“This gloomy idea that the only solution for self-love is self-hatred and self-accusation was built upon a frightening view of God. [Martin] Luther could only see that God was all Judge and no love, his righteousness being all about punishing sinners, ... Here was a God he could only ever cower before. Then, in 1519, when he was looking again at the issues of confession and repentance, it struck him that, after the sinner had confessed, the priest would pronounce God’s promise of forgiveness.... And with that, everything changed. Now he saw that forgiveness is not dependent on how certain the sinner is that he has been truly contrite; forgiveness comes simply by receiving the promise of God. Thus the sinner’s hope is found, not in himself, but outside himself, in God’s word of promise.”

Michael Reeves

Though righteousness and justice often appear together, especially in the Old Testament, each word needs to be handled on its own. There is an aspect of this word “righteous” that places it right between holiness and justice with overlap on both sides. Righteousness is about a standard, a perfect standard that often leads to righteous, or just, deeds. The word cluster for this word in Hebrew includes various forms of tzadeqah. It refers to a standard of right-ness. But in addition to a right standard, it is a word that involves right relationships. Misphat, the Hebrew word that is usually translated “justice”, occurs, in its many forms, more than 200 times in the Old Testament. These two words are used in combination with each other in the Old Testament close to 40 times. When used together, there is one English term that best encapsulates both concepts – social justice.

### READ TOGETHER:

**Romans 5:1-2 (NIV)** “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 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.”

**Titus 3:4-5a (NIV)** “But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.”

**Psalms 89:14 (NIV)** “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you.”

**Jeremiah 9:23-24 (NIV)** “This is what the Lord says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these delight,” declares the Lord.”

**Lamentations 3:22-24 (MSG)** “God’s loyal love couldn’t have run out, his merciful love couldn’t have dried up. They’re created new every morning. How great your faithfulness! I’m sticking with God (I say it over and over). He’s all I’ve got left.”

**Deuteronomy 10:18 (NIV)** “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.”

**Micah 6:8 (NIV)** “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

**Response to righteousness** (Romans 5:1-2; Titus 3:4-5a) Grasping the reality of God’s righteousness should not lead us to a fear of failure but to immense relief and gratitude. Relief – that it is not our righteousness that saves us for we would all, surely, fail. Gratitude – that the righteous forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ is what saves us.

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**DISCUSS:** Read through the passages in Romans and Titus together. Why is it so difficult to stop striving for our own righteousness in our own strength? What can you do to daily remind yourself that your righteousness is from God, alone?

**DIG DEEPER: Failed attempts** (Romans 10:1-10; Philippians 3:2-9) The ancient Mandarin Chinese depiction of the concept of “righteousness” is fascinating. It is written like a fraction with the word for “lamb” over the word for “me”. Consider that depiction and do some studying of this ancient word. Read these lengthier passages in Romans and Philippians. Compare the two passages, noting the contrasting elements of God’s righteousness and our own righteousness. If you’ve been a Christian for quite a long time, you might have begun to think that God got a pretty good deal when He got you! Discover how justification is broader than a simple “just as if you never sinned”.

**Mercy/Justice, Love/Righteousness** (Psalm 89:14) At the cross, God demonstrates righteousness and He grants righteousness, for He is both just and the One who justifies. God’s nature causes Him to help; our nature causes us to need His help.

**DISCUSS:** In what ways does God’s mercy, grace, love,... join with His justice and righteousness at the cross? Consider Psalm 89 and the way the psalmist joins those concepts in a word picture.

**Lament and Joy** (Jeremiah 9:23-24; Lamentations 3:22-24) Almost the entire book of Lamentations is a lament. And yet, right in the middle of it, we find the well-known passage written by Jeremiah, a man often described as “the weeping prophet”.

**DISCUSS:** How is it even possible to declare God’s faithfulness and hold deeply personal sorrow at the same time? In what ways can Jeremiah serve as an encouragement as to how we CAN hold both joy and sorrow at the same time? Pray for one another in current situations of grief and sorrow. Invite the Holy Spirit to minister refreshment and great hope.

**DIG DEEPER: Defender of the marginalised** (Deuteronomy 10:18; Micah 6:8) Tim Keller writes, “...the Bible says that God is the defender of the poor; it never says He is the defender of the rich. ...Why? Rich people can certainly be treated unjustly, but philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff says it is a simple fact that the lower classes are “not only disproportionately vulnerable to injustice, but usually disproportionately actual victims of injustice. Injustice is not equally distributed.”” and “Rectifying justice is mishpat. It means punishing wrong-doers and caring for the victims of unjust treatment. Primary justice, or tzadeqah, is behavior that, if it was prevalent in the world, would render rectifying justice unnecessary, because everyone would be living in right relationship to everyone else.” Do a deep dive into a biblical understanding of justice. In most ancient civilisations, the gods were associated with the powerful. The underprivileged were expected to submit to that power; they were never expected to benefit from it. But throughout the Old Testament, we see that our God who rescued the slaves out of Egypt was deeply committed to the welfare of the underprivileged. Check out all of the places these two Hebrew words occur and then discover similar Greek words in the New Testament.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- **Book:** Michael Reeves, *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*
- **Book:** Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes us Just*
- **Book:** Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Journey Toward Justice: Personal Encounters in the Global South*
- **Book:** Skye Jethani, *What if Jesus was Serious About Justice?*
- **Video:** #shorts God’s Justice with Rachael Denhollander <https://youtu.be/NEmCEIDKem4?si=7-l3NWuPip1GHUVg>