

# Lord's Day 4

March 17, 2019

Willoughby Heights CanRC

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Read: Romans 3:1-21

Psalm 120

Text: Lord's Day 4

Amen-song: Psalm 94:7,11

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, asking questions comes naturally to us human beings. It's the way we learn. It's even said: there's no such thing as a bad question.

Actually, there is. There is such a thing as a bad question. For also our ability to ask questions has been influenced by human selfishness. We'll use questions, not to learn, but to make an argument. Questions can be a subtle way of challenging a reality, of sowing doubt regarding truth, correctness, fairness. The first question in the Bible is the one the serpent asked Eve. That was a bad question.

A question that begins with "but" is often such a question, a question that challenges, a question that expresses a focus on oneself as opposed to others. "But why?" Such questions are rarely appreciated.

Lord's Day 4 consists of 3 such questions. In questions 9 and 11 it's obvious: the first word of the question is indeed 'but'.<sup>1</sup> "But doesn't God do man an injustice?" "But isn't God also merciful?" Question 10 doesn't begin with 'but'. However, the start to the answer, that adamant "certainly not", that indicates there's a challenge here too. The question might as well be: "But surely God will allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?"

All three questions come down to this. "But is God being fair?" "Is God fair?" In the language we find in our Bibles: "Is God righteous?" "Is God just?" The Apostle Paul asked this kind of question, noting very carefully that he is speaking in a human way, a sinful way: "Shall we say that God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?" (Romans 3:5) "Is God being fair by being angry with us and punishing us?"

"But is God being fair?" Many people wonder about this. Maybe you do too. Wonder: is God being fair? When your relationship breaks down. When you're in a hospital bed. When you observe the pain present in this world. When you think of the plane crash this past Sunday. When you think of all those people who died in New Zealand this past week. Is God being fair? In the Bible, Job asked that question. As did the author of the Dark Psalm, Psalm 88. And the prophet Habakkuk.

How do you find an answer to a question like that question? Many folks just think about it. And draw the conclusion: God can't be fair. Those who refuse to acknowledge God will say:

If God demands perfection when people can't be perfect, He's not fair.

If God punishes people when they don't do what He wants, He's not fair.

If God punishes people when He is merciful and forgiving God, He's not fair.

Many will say, God is not fair.

But the answer to our question is not to be found in our own minds. God should speak for Himself. We need to turn to the Bible. In the Bible God explains Himself.

And when it comes to God being "fair", a good place to turn is the letter to the Romans. The Bible book of Romans is all about God being "fair". The key idea of Romans is found expressed in Romans 1:17, which had our attention at the beginning of this month. There we read: "For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed, from faith to faith." And "righteousness", that's the characteristic of doing what is right, of being just, of being "fair". The Gospel reveals, the good news is that God is fair.

That's what we will explore this afternoon.

**We listen to God's instruction on God's righteousness summed up in this theme: God is totally fair**

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<sup>1</sup> That's not the case for the original German version.

**in how He treats people. We'll consider three things. God is totally fair (1) In demanding love of incompetent people; (2) In punishing disobedient people; and (3) In displaying justice to selfish people.**

**1) First then, God is totally fair in demanding love of incompetent people.**

Incompetent people, that's everyone. Everyone is incompetent. Lord's Days 2 & 3 have made that clear. By nature we are so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil. Totally unable. Romans 3 makes that clear. Those who don't know God's law have sinned. Also those who do know God's law. (Romans 3:23) Humans are incompetent, says God. And doesn't life prove it? Can it be said of anyone – other than Jesus Christ – that not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments ever arises in their hearts?

God's commandments. What is it again that God commands? What does God demand of us? We learned with LD 2: love. Love God above all else. Love your neighbour, your fellow human being, as you love yourself. Do not put yourself first. Put God first. And put everyone else on one line with yourself.

By nature we can't do that. By nature we're cannot love others first. By nature we love ourselves first. By nature we are selfish. In the face of God's command to love, we're incompetent. We can't keep the law. It's a fact of life today.

And then that question arises. Very human. But also very selfish. Very unloving. Is God being fair to us when He demands of us what we cannot do?

That begs the question: who is to blame for the fact that we are incompetent?

Not God. God created us competent. You see, God is a God of love. Love, that's His glory. And we humans were created in His image. We are to be people of love. And when God had made all things, everything was good, everything was perfect, everything could do what it was supposed to do (Genesis 1:31). When God brought Eve to Adam, yahoo, there was perfect love. Such perfect love, that the two became one flesh.

But then came that moment we stopped loving. We heard about that last week Sunday afternoon. God came to Adam and Eve, in love. But Adam and Eve, boys and girls, what did Adam and Eve do when they heard God walking in the garden? They went and hid in the bushes. They didn't want to be near God. And then, when God confronts them with their selfishness, what happens? Adam shifts the blame: to Eve and even to God! Eve shifts the blame to the serpent. We don't see love. We see selfishness. We see broken relationships. Humans push God away. Humans, a husband and a wife, push each other away. And it's still that way today. Just look at the world around us. No, just look at yourself, you who profess to serve God. Do you always seek what's best for God, even if it costs you? Do you always consider the needs of others in the same way you consider your own needs? No. None of us meets the standard of perfect love. We're just like Adam and Eve: we hide from God and we evade responsibility. And so we fall short of the glory of God, we fall short of God's standard to love.

Even Lord's Day 4 couldn't avoid a hint of that blame shifting. It notes how man, how we humans sinned *at the instigation of the devil*. Some may think, "See, the devil is to blame. We couldn't help ourselves." But that's not so. Lord's Day 4 corrects us on that score. There was *deliberate* disobedience. *Wilful* disobedience. We wanted it ourselves. We weren't victims of circumstance. We could have resisted the devil. We should have resisted the devil. We should have chosen for God and against ourselves. And we could have. But we did not. And ever since then, every time we are confronted with a choice, for or against God, if left to ourselves, we'd make the same decision. Romans 3(:5) reflects this: "Shall we say that God is unrighteous, is not fair, to inflict wrath on us?" Paul feels the need to add "I speak in a human way."

We were competent, we could keep the law of love.

We became incompetent, unable to keep the law of love. *We* changed.

But God did not. God does not change. God did not drop His demand for perfect love. To do so, would not be fair. You don't change the rules of a game while you're playing it. Right boys and girls? You don't decide halfway a soccer game that every goal kicked by a defence is worth two points. You don't decide partway into a volleyball game that the net should be lower because the players are short. When you start the game, you play the whole game according to the rules in place at the start of the game. That's fair. Anything else would be unfair.

God maintains the rules for this world. God doesn't change them. God doesn't lower the standard. His glory is love and humans are His image. We are to reflect His love. The fact that we no longer can reflect God perfectly doesn't mean that God should change the rules.

God does not change His demands. He's perfectly fair in demanding love of incompetent people. God is fair for He does not change. We changed, and that wasn't God's doing. We humans were unfair to God by wilfully destroying our ability to love, to be perfect as our Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

**2) Now, when one challenge fails, it's so human to come with another. If the demand of God doesn't change, what about the consequences. Couldn't God just ignore our failures? Let's see in the second place that God is totally fair in punishing disobedient people.**

That people are disobedient is obvious. If people are incompetent to keep God's law of love, they are not going to keep it. And not keeping the law means you're not obeying the law, you're being disobedient.

Now in all of this we do need to realize that the law of which we are speaking is the law of love. The Ten Commandments are summed up in the one word "love". Disobedience to any commandment of God is a failure to show love.

If you worship something other than or besides God, you don't love God.

If you worship God in your own way instead of in God's way, you don't love God.

If you use God's Name to add power to your own words, you're being arrogant and selfish, you're making God say things He doesn't say, and you don't love God.

If you fail to follow God's example of taking a rest day once every seven days and devoting the day to the Lord, you're being stubborn and selfish and don't love God.

If you don't respect authority, you don't love God who is at back of all authority; and you don't love your fellow human beings whom God has given the task of leadership.

If you don't respect life, you hate fellow humans and the God of life.

If you don't respect intimacy, you destroy love, for you shatter marriage, you break up people, and you scorn God who made male and female to be one flesh.

If you don't respect possessions, you are selfish and greedy.

If you don't respect another's honour, you are proud and self seeking, you scorn others and you scorn God.

If you even so much as want to be selfish, you lack the love God is looking for.

Disobedience to God's law is a failure to show love.

Now, what happens when a person does not receive the love that should be theirs? How does a husband or wife feel when their spouse fails to love them? How do children feel when their parents abuse them? Or parents, when their children ignore or dishonour them? People that are to be loved but are not, they feel hurt. And such hurt goes with anger. A justified anger, for they are not receiving the love that should be theirs.

Feeling hurt and experiencing a justified anger. That's very true of God. This is what God has us read in the Bible (Genesis 6:5-6): "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had

made man on the earth, and it grieved Him to His heart.” “It grieved Him to His heart.”

God is hurt.

And that’s why God is angry. God is angry with man. And who would now say that God isn’t right in being angry? If a man cheats on his wife, does his wife not have a right to be angry? If parents abuse their children, do the children not have a right to be angry? If children dishonour their parents, do the parents not have a right to be angry? Says God in His law: “I am a jealous God.” Not “jealous” in the sense of “I want what the other person has.” But “jealous” in the sense of “I hold onto what is mine.” God closely guards what is His, for He loves it. And when His love is not returned, He becomes angry. He’s very clear about that. “I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me.” “Those who hate Me”: that’s all those who love themselves over and above God. “God visits the iniquity”: that’s the Bible’s way of saying God punishes them.

God is grieved to His heart. He is hurt. God is angry with a justified anger. A righteous anger. He had told us and still tells us: failure to love has dire consequences.

Do we not see it in the world about us? Do we not notice it, even in our own lives? those dire consequences? That punishment of God?

We see it in the misery that surrounds us. In natural disasters. In diseases. In a death bed. That’s the curse which God brought upon this world. A curse that expressed God’s hurt. A punishment that flows directly out of God’s love, God’s jealous love, God’s love which goes unanswered. When the Bible says that God is grieved to His heart it continues: “So the LORD said, ‘I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land.’” (Genesis 6:7). The curse, the punishment, is because of God’s hurt.

But it’s not only misery that expresses God’s punishment. Sin itself is punishment. When we sinned, God respected our freedom, the independence He gave us, by allowing us to be as we had chosen. When God says in the Law that He visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Him, who love themselves ahead of God and others, then God is saying that He will punish humans by giving them free rein. “Alright, go, do what you want.” And humans being by nature what they are, will take leave of God, at best use Him for their own purposes. They will sin, they will be selfish, and they will suffer for it. Not that every bad thing that happens to us is a punishment for a sin we’ve personally committed. But you’d have to be deaf and blind and naïve not to realize that sins make life impossible. The loneliness in senior homes today is in part a direct consequence of the anarchist movement in the 1960s. The opioid drug overdose crisis is only possible because of drug abuse. The high rates of criminality in our society are the fruit of dysfunctional families, where the 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> commandments are ignored. If humans don’t want to listen to God, if *you* don’t want to listen to God, you’ve only got yourself to blame for what comes your way.

Such disobedience brings on the ultimate punishment, the ultimate consequence. Eternal death. Eternal death is being banished from God’s presence. Eternal death is being delivered over to oneself and to all others with no hope of rescue, no hope of salvation. Eternal death is hell, it’s loneliness and pain and every horrible thing you can imagine.

But that’s not fair, humans will protest. True, it might not be fair when seen from a selfish, human perspective. But from God’s perspective, it’s totally fair. He warned us this would happen. “The day you eat you will surely die.” And then we choose to walk out on God. Why shouldn’t He let us go? Indeed, strictly speaking it would be unfair if God would not let us go our own way, if God did not give us the freedom to sin!

So let’s not turn things around. Let’s see things in the right perspective.

God is totally fair. He said there’d be consequences if we sinned. “The day you eat of that fruit you will surely die.” And so it happened. God is faithful to His Word.

God is totally fair in punishing disobedient people.

**3) Still, it doesn't sit right with us humans. Does God not have pity? Is God not merciful? Why can't God just overlook our faults, ignore our sins? We've come to our third consideration: God is totally fair in displaying justice to selfish people.**

Selfish people. That would be another way of rendering the Biblical expression: "haters of God." For the Biblical word "hate" does not carry the negative connotations it does in our every day use of the term. Jesus says we are to hate our parents, our spouses, our children, our siblings, even our own life (Luke 14:26). By that He doesn't mean we must despise them. By that He means they are not to be first in our lives.<sup>2</sup> God comes first. And if God doesn't come first, well, then, in Biblical language, you hate God.

Selfish people. Those are people who put themselves first. Who put themselves ahead of God. Who put themselves ahead of others. Who want to look good and so try to make others look bad. By saying, for example, that as God is merciful He should park His sense of justice.

Truth is, God's mercy and justice cannot be played out against each other. God's mercy is just and God's justice is merciful. Romans 3 bears that out, though true, it's such a difficult passage, even in the original Greek, that it's not easy to see this.

Let's walk our way through things a bit. Maybe take a Bible to read along as we walk through a few verses there. We'll begin at verse 23.

Romans 3:23 states the reality: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Jew and Greek, with or without the law, all are disobedient. All fail to love as God loves.

Then verse 24 goes on to say that all who have sinned "are justified by His grace as a gift." Now, the words "mercy" and "grace" are in many ways synonyms. They mean the same thing. Certainly when 'grace' is described as an unearned 'gift'. So what we read in verse 24 is this: sinners are justified by God's mercy. God's mercy justifies. It tells us, the two are not to be played out against each other, the way the third question in Lord's Day 4 does. Rather, they work in tandem.

How? Romans 3:24: "through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." Christ Jesus is the display of both God's mercy and God's justice.

That display began already before Christ came. We jump ahead to the end of verse 25: "This was to show God's righteousness because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins." God's divine forbearance is a display of His mercy. All those sins committed before Christ came were not punished by God as they ought to have been. He held off, for He knew Christ was yet coming. Was it fair of God, not to punish those sins? Yes, it was. For God knew that the eternal death those sins deserved would yet happen.

Romans 3 makes clear that this eternal death did indeed happen. We back up in verse 25: Christ Jesus was put forward by God "as a propitiation by his blood". "Propitiation": that word means Christ Jesus satisfied God's demand where the price of sin is concerned. The price of sin is death, eternal death. This is the death that Christ died. The "propitiation" happened "by Christ's blood". "Blood" in Scripture is "life". When something is done "by blood" or "with blood" it means the injury of death.<sup>3</sup> Christ made satisfaction for our sins by giving His life. This, verse 26 indicates, shows God's righteousness. It shows that God is just. It shows that God is fair.

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<sup>2</sup> The original of Genesis 29:30 says that Jacob loved Rachel and hated Leah. The ESV translates this with "Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah". It's interesting (and odd) that Genesis 29:31 in the ESV reads "When the LORD saw that Leah was hated..."

<sup>3</sup> There's been a lot of debate about whether the translation should be 'propitiation' (ESV) or 'expiation' (RSV). The ESV Study Bible has a helpful study note on this. BTW, it's interesting to note that the NIV-2011 translates "sacrifice of atonement" and indicates in the footnote that the term used by Paul is actually a direct reference to the atonement cover on the ark.

And so, when Christ died, we see God's mercy and justice working in tandem.

We see God's mercy in the fact that *Christ* and *not we* died for our sins.

We see God's justice in the fact that a death did take place as a payment for our sins.

Did we deserve to be saved by God? No, not at all. We are by nature selfish people who walk away from God. We don't deserve to be saved. And so, when God saves us, there's mercy in all of this. But God's mercy did not and does not nullify God's justice. As we hear it said each Lord's Supper service: "The wrath of God against sin is so great that He could not leave it unpunished, but has punished it in His beloved Son Jesus Christ by the bitter and shameful death on the cross." (Form for Lord's Supper)

**God is totally fair in how He treats people.**

We, people, have to stop thinking and talking in a human way. In that fallen, in that sinful, in that selfish human way. God is totally fair. We, humans, with our questions that seek to escape reality and shirk responsibility, we're the ones who are not being fair.

God is totally fair in demanding love of humans who are not able to love. It's not His fault we became incompetent to love.

God is totally fair in punishing humans who fail to love. He warned us what would come our way if we were disobedient and He is true to Himself.

God is totally fair in displaying justice to humans who are selfish by nature. His justice confirms His character. And His justice doesn't detract from His mercy.

We can't blame God for the mess we're in. As we confess with the opening line of the Canons of Dort (I.1): "Since all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and deserve eternal death, God would have done no one an injustice if it had been His will to leave the whole human race in sin and under the curse, and to condemn it on account of its sin."

We can't blame God. He's totally fair. He is righteous. He is just.

Thankfully, He's also loving. He is merciful. He is gracious. The Canons of Dort go on to say: "But in this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, that whoever believes Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Dear people, don't question God's fairness. If you do, it'll cost you your life, forever.

Rather, believe in God's love expressed in Christ Jesus and imitate that love.

Amen.