

Is God unjust?



Ever years ago, last month, I gave my very first presentation defending the Christian worldview at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater Physics Club. It focused on the scientific accuracy of the Genesis creation account. While the presentation went well, I wasn't the most eloquent speaker since I was shy, introverted, and a novice at defending the Christian worldview. I'm glad it wasn't recorded because I don't think I would enjoy watching it now.

Needless to say, I've been asked a ton of questions over the years, interacting with skeptics and helping Christians be better positioned to defend their faith. Some questions are extremely straightforward, such as, "What is the half-life of Carbon-14?" Some are straightforward but a bit complex, such as, "How does Carbon-14 dating work?" Some questions are more subjective, such as, "Why do most people doubt the Bible?"

And then there's the slightly more challenging category of questions—the emotionally charged questions. Answers to these questions may be very straightforward or more complex. Either way, however, they can be more difficult to address, not because of the nature of the answer but because of the implications to the one asking the question.

As a generic example, what if someone asked you if they were able to join an exciting tour (let's say, oh, I don't know... a Grand Canyon tour with The Starting Point Project!), and you knew the tour was already full? The answer is straightforward, but you also know they may be very upset hearing it. Furthermore, if you were supposed to have done something enabling them to go, but you didn't, you would be even more hesitant to answer. The answer is not complex, but you may wish to avoid the awkward confrontation.

Just this week a fairly new Christian working hard to share his faith asked me for advice on answering a skeptic's tough question.

Here was the question. "Is God unjust?" The context leading to this question was the biblical indication that those who reject Jesus are subject to separation from God in eternal punishment. The skeptic claimed that it is unjust for God to punish someone forever for a temporal "crime." Whatever sins the person committed were finite in time, so the punishment, being eternal, is not fair or just. Therefore, God is unjust.

What is "just?" Meriam-Webster defines it this way:

"acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good"

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“conforming to a standard of correctness”

That seems like a sensible definition, doesn't it?

So, how did I answer this person's question? I answered it very prayerfully! Seriously! While he was still in the middle of asking the question, I knew where he was headed and I started praying that my response would be Spirit-led, rather than just an “off-the-top-of-my-head” reply.

I told him he could ask the skeptic a very crucial question as part of his response. Jesus often answered questions by asking a question of His own, and we can learn a lot from His example. Here's the question I suggested he ask. “What source of authority did you just now turn to in order to conclude that God's punishment of sin is unjust?” And an additional similar question, “What standard of morality are you using to judge God's actions?” That will place them in a difficult position. You're not trying to be unkind. Instead, you're trying to make an important point that is essential to understand in order to have a meaningful conversation.

If the skeptic is truly using God's standard, their claim is a complete non-sequitur. (That is just a fancy Latin term meaning that the conclusion doesn't logically follow.) If someone uses God's standards, they can't say God is wrong or unfair. However, if they are not using God's standard, they will have to indicate which standard they are specifically referring to, why they chose that standard, and why it is the correct standard to use! Simply saying, “Well, I just don't think...” doesn't cut it. That would mean their own reasoning should be the standard. Here are a few problems with that. There are other people on the planet, many of whom would have a different standard or opinion than this skeptic? Why shouldn't we use their standards? Maybe we should survey everyone and use the majority opinion! Or maybe it should be a country-by-country survey, and the results should apply only to the individuals within each country. Perhaps the question should be refined further to survey each state or province within a country. But people change their minds, so you'll need to vote regularly to keep current. And what about people who are dual citizens? Hmmm.

Here's another very important point. It shouldn't be a matter of how we feel about the standard but a matter of determining what the TRUE standard actually is. If you determine the true standard, it really doesn't matter whether you like it or not. Imagine a criminal on trial for embezzling millions of dollars from a company. The judge's sentence includes repaying the stolen money, paying an extra \$20,000 in fines, and spending 5 years in prison. Imagine the thief saying that he doesn't think the sentence is fair and the judge saying, “Oh, I didn't realize you don't like the punishment. I will just let you keep the money and only pay a \$100 fine, with no prison time.” That would be crazy. The sentencing is based on what is written in the law, not on how the criminal feels about it. (Yes, we've seen terrible decisions by many judges in many different instances, but we are dealing with the Ultimate Judge, who is perfect and all-powerful, not fallen human judges.)

Part of the struggle regarding wrapping our heads around eternal punishment lies in not truly understanding the level of the offense. If someone was caught shoplifting some gum from a gas station and they were sentenced to life in prison with no parole, that would seem a bit too harsh, to

say the least. However, I think most of us, including Christians, don't truly understand the nature of our offenses. By way of a weak analogy, consider a homeless person violently attacking another homeless person and stealing their blanket. Now consider someone violently attacking the President of the United States. You can imagine the consequences for the latter being much more punitive. The offense would be perceived as much greater. (In God's economy, the homeless person is just as valuable as any president, but on an earthly level, our legal system, right or wrong, treats them very differently.) We have offended an infinite God, and the consequences are more dire than we like to think.

Part of God being a loving God is that He will not force anyone to spend eternity with Him. The good news is He has provided a way for us to avoid having to suffer the eternal consequences of our sin, so anyone who does end up separated from God will be doing so by their own choice. It wasn't God's will that they suffer those consequences:

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, [a] not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Lastly, if the skeptic doesn't like the standard put forth by the Word of God and rejects it, that's fine. They might want to consider creating their own universe, and then they can set any rules they want! However, the universe they currently live in was created by God, and He justifiably gets to set the rules! (I say that with a smile on my face, not in a condescending, sarcastic tone.) I don't claim to understand everything about God's plan for humanity, and I am not responsible for doing so.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9)

If I were in charge of everything (and it's a very good thing I'm not), I would probably do things differently based on my current, very limited knowledge and wisdom. Admittedly, if I knew everything God knows (which is quite a bit!), I don't doubt I might very well do it the way He has chosen to. 😊 I've asked numerous skeptics, "What makes more sense logically? If we were to die and stand before God, that He would judge us on whatever standard we made up for ourselves, or that would He judge us on His own standard?" Every skeptic agreed it makes more sense that God would use His own standard. The question that always follows is, "Given that, do you think it would be important to find out what His standard is?" They know the answer is, "Yes," but often hesitate to respond. This is understandably an emotionally charged topic. We need to trust God regarding what He has revealed to us in His Word and ask for His help in understanding it and believing it, even when we might not exactly like what we're reading!

Volumes could be written on this (and have been), but I could only scratch the surface. I didn't have a chance to broach the more interpersonal aspects of this type of a question and risked coming

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across too harsh or uncaring. I trust you understand the challenge I faced in addressing this very sensitive issue.

If you have any questions about this or any other issue, please don't hesitate to [contact us!](#)