

Holiness and Justice

By R.C. Sproul

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I guess we'd all like to find a magic formula, secret recipe that would give us instant spiritual growth or spiritual maturity and understanding in three easy lessons.

I've seen materials in bookstores that promise to do that for us, but I've never seen any of them deliver. But tonight I have for you good news. I can give you a quick way, a shortcut to spiritual growth and deeper understanding. And here it is. You want to grow quickly, go through the scripture, and every time that you find a passage of scripture that you do not understand, Mark it with a question mark, and then go back and try to find out what it means.

So that way you focus your attention on what you don't know. But that's only one part of the recipe. The most important part of the recipe is this. Go through the Bible. And every time you find something in scripture that you don't like, put a star next to it.

You have to be scrupulously honest here. You read something in there and you say, I don't like that. And then you go and you study all of those passages that have stars next to them and concentrate on them. And maybe when you study it more carefully, give it the benefit of the philosophy of the second class, you will discover that the reason why you didn't like it was because you didn't understand it. And if that's what happens, then you will have benefited by gaining a new understanding of the word of God.

On the other hand, if after careful study, you find out you still don't like it, that's even better, because all you have to do now is ask the question, what's wrong? Either there's something wrong with the word of God or there's something wrong with me that needs to be changed.

Either God needs to change or I need to change. Now, most of the world, when they confront that question, decide to have God change. That's why they don't get anywhere spiritually.

But if you can find the things that you don't like about God and about his work and understand that those are like alarm buzzers going off that tell you where you need to change your thinking and to change your life, you have a shortcut to spiritual growth. Now, theologians do that, and they categorize certain passages of scripture under the rubric that they call technically the phrases *dorioris*, which means in simple English, the hard sayings of the Bible. And that's what I want to do tonight is to look at some of those hard sayings of the Bible, those portions of the Bible that we may easily find offensive to us. How many times have you heard people say, I can relate to Jesus, he's nice, but the God of the Old Testament is more than I can handle?

Do you hear that from time to time? I do. And yet Jesus calls this God of the Old Testament Father and Jesus says that it's that God of the Old Testament that sends him into the world. And Jesus said, I speak nothing on my own authority, but only that which the Father has revealed unto me. And he's speaking of the God of the Old Testament.

And yet we seem to struggle with the very being whom Jesus called Father. I'd like to ask you to turn your attention for a moment now to one of the hard sayings of the Old Testament. It's found in the 10th chapter of the book of Leviticus beginning at verse one, Leviticus chapter ten verse one.

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Now you get the picture here. Two young men, men who had only recently been ordained and consecrated to the priesthood. They go to the altar and they experiment a little bit

with the liturgy of the altar and God instantly, without mercy, without the benefit of a second chance, suddenly irrevocably, annihilates them with fire.

How do you handle it? I remember a few years ago when I was a Minister in a different denomination from the one I'm in. Now our Church received the latest edition of Sunday school curriculum that was to be used in the local Parish. And it was my job in the Church to examine this curriculum and see how suitable it was for our young people. Now remember, when we looked at the junior high curriculum, there was a segment there studying these narratives in the Old Testament. And what the curriculum said was at times the Old Testament narratives appear harsh.

We see God killing instantly Nadab and Abihu, or we read in the books of the Old Testament that God ordered the harem, that is, he commanded that the people of Israel engage in a war of conquest, a war of aggression against the inhabitants of Canaan and institute the band by which they are not only to come in and occupy Canaan, but they are to kill the Canaanites man, woman and children. The curriculum said, we know now, in light of the New Testament's revelation of the character of God, that God couldn't possibly have been responsible for that kind of activity. And so what we find in the Old Testament is the primitive Savage, prescientific Jew trying to understand his own experience within the framework of his own theology and to get somehow his religion to sanction these acts of savagery. Now that's one view of the Old Testament that very neatly eliminates the offense of passages like this.

But what happens if you're persuaded that this is the word of God and not merely the opinions of primitive savages? Then how do you deal with these incidents in the Old Testament. Let's go back to the text for a minute. What do you suppose Aaron's reaction was when he finds out that his two sons have just been wiped out by the sudden act of God's punishment?

What do you think? I think he was tinked. And he goes to see Moses. And let me take some Liberty with the text and see if we can overhear Aaron coming to Moses to the tent of Moses and saying, Moses, did you see what he did? Look, I'm giving him my life. I serve him every day. My sons follow in my footsteps. And for one slight transgression, God wipes them off. Now, you better talk to him about that. Then Moses said to Aaron, Aaron, this is what the Lord spoke when he said, by those who come near me, I will be regarded as Holy. And before all of the people, I will be glorified.

So Aaron, therefore, you bet he kept his peace. The debate was over, wasn't it? When God reminded him, hey, that is my Holy sanctuary. Every one of those men consecrated to the priesthood, whether they're your sons or anybody else's sons, doesn't make any difference. They have been instructed by my Commandments that I have delivered through Angels on what is appropriate in my sanctuary, on my altar. And they arrogantly and presumptuously, played around and played games in that Holy place.

And I won't tolerate that. But that's only one example, isn't it? How about Asa? Oh, I remember the first time I read that story that really got me. You remember the story of Asa, how Asa was a Kohathite.

The Ark of the Covenant had been captured by the Philistines and then later recovered by Israel. And David wants to have a celebration in Jerusalem. And he wants the Ark of the Covenant, the most sacred Holy vessel of the Jewish community, brought now into Jerusalem. And he's in a hurry. And so he orders that the Ark of the Covenant be transported by oxcart into the city. And Asa is walking along as one of the attendants of the sacred art. And you know what happens? In the middle of the procession, one of the oxen stumbles and the Ox cart starts to tilt.

And suddenly the Ark of the Covenant is going to slide from its mooring there on the Ox cart and go into the mud. Instinctively, Asa reaches forth his hand to steady the Ark.

And when he does it, he hears a voice from heaven where God cries down, thank you, Asa.

That's not what happened. As soon as he touches the Ark of the Covenant, God zaps him right there. He kills him. How do you deal with it?

How do you deal with it? Another way of dealing with it is to say, well, again, this is how the Jews understood it. It seemed like God did it, but we could give a natural explanation to it. These people had so much reverence so much awe and so much fear for the sacred things of God, that when Asa went through this traumatic experience of touching the Holy Ark of the Covenant, It literally scared him to death. And he died, had a heart attack and died on the spot.

Not that God actually directly and immediately visited him with the death penalty. God's not like that.

Remember reading a sermon by Jonathan Edwards on that where Edwards spoke of the sin of arrogance in the presence of God. We remember that Asa was, as I said, a Kohathite. Remember the tribe of Israel who were designated for the priestly roles and activities? They were the Levites, and the Levites were broken up into clans and in the families. And one of those families were the sons of Cohab.

And their specific training, and their specific task was to take care of the sacred vessels. And if you look earlier in the sacred scriptures, where God gives his divine instructions for the care of these objects, he explicitly and specifically spells out for the Kohathites that under no circumstances are they ever, ever, ever to touch the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was fashioned with rings on the edge through which staves long poles were to be

inserted so that as it was being carried, no human being would ever touch it. We might ask the question, what was it doing in the Ox cart in the first place?

But we say, but wait a minute, Isaac, it was an involuntary reaction. He didn't want the Ark to fall in the mud and become desecrated. Can you imagine the Ark of the Covenant being covered with mud?

You asked that question of God. I'm sure that God would say yes. I can imagine that. What's wrong with that? What's wrong with the mud? The mud is not going to contaminate my throne. The mud obeys my laws. The mud is simply dirt becoming mud. When the dust is mixed with water, it's sitting there doing what mud is supposed to do.

It's being mud. It follows my laws of nature. Exactly. It's not the mud that will contaminate the Ark, Asa. It's Asa that contaminates the Ark. It's the touch of man. He's the rebel in my creation, not the dirt or the air or the poppy seas. It's people that I have commanded never to touch this object. And so God kills them when he orders the slaughter of the Canaanites. What does he tell the Jews?

Hey, I am not doing this because you're good guys and they're bad guys. I am not giving you the land of Canaan because you deserve it. He spells that out as clearly as he could possibly do it.

But he said, right now, you are my instrument of judgment against a pagan, wicked nation that is daily involved in treason against my authority, and I'm going to use your armies to execute them. But don't you get a big head out of it because you really deserve the Saint.

That's a hard saying. We look at capital punishment in the Old Testament. Do you realize that there are over 35 crimes by which the symbolic law requires the death penalty?

If you go consult a wizard, a trip to Jimmy to Greek, you die. If you curse your parents, you die. If you commit adultery, you die. And we look at that and we say, wait a minute. This bloodthirsty God of Israel is the perpetrator of cruel and unusual punishment.

How do you respond to that? What kind of God would wipe out the whole world except for one family like Noah and drown all these little children and women and helpless people? What kind of God would do that? Let me try to answer that question for you. A Holy God, that's what God. But we're still left with the fact that why is it that God doesn't normally react that way to sin?

I'm going to appeal to a theologian of may astonish you. The very controversial Roman Catholic theologian Hans King in one of his earlier works, deals with this very question, and I think it's one of the finest treatments of it I've ever seen. He said, for example, look at this list of capital crimes in the Old Testament, 35 of them or so on. And it seems harsh from our perspective, looking back along the quarters of history in light of the even more benevolent attitudes of the New Testament. But don't you realize that that list of capital offenses that we find in the Old Testament already represents a radical reduction in the number of sins that God regards as capital?

And Kung reminds us to go back to the beginning, where Kung says that if you recall the warning and the probation that was given to Adam and Eve was very clear. The day that you eat of it, what? You shall surely die later, the soul that sins shall die in creation. Dear friends, every sin is a capital offense. Why? Because every sin is an act of cosmic treason. The slightest sin, the peccadilla, is an act by which we stand up and resist the righteous, Holy authority of Almighty God.

It is an act of sedition in our slate of sin. And God said, soul of sins shall die. But he doesn't just say that if you sin, you die. He goes further than that. He says, the day you eat of it, you shall surely die.

I can't think of a Bible verse that's been more abused by evangelicals than that one, because we look at that and we say, well, that's exactly what happened. Adam and Eve sinned, and that very day they underwent spiritual death. That's right, they did. But that's not what God was promising them. God didn't just say, the day that you will eat of it, you're going to suffer spiritual death. He's talking about death death. The real thing, the full thing, the full measure of it. The loss of existence. And the second, Adam and Eve transgressed against God. They forfeited all rights and privileges in this creation. Every breath of air that filled their lungs after they violated the law of God was breathed by Grace.

And Kun points [inaudible] he said, look, but it pleased God to be merciful.

But it was mercy that he allowed Adam and Eve to continue to live for another day and another day and another week and another month and another year.

They received a stay of execution. But God kept capital punishment in effect for every sin. And he appointed one who is generally considered to be the most benevolent woman in all of the universe to be his executioner. And we call her Mother Nature.

Death, according to Scripture, is unnatural. If there's no sin in the world, there is no death. But we have a universality of death according to this book, because of the universality of sin, a sin in which we are even born and conceived, we all must die. But God has given us a period of Grace in which to work out his activity of redemption. And how does he relate to our sin normally? Normally he's patient, he's slow to anger, he's long suffering, he forgives. Read the Book of Judges, for example, when I read the Old Testament, you know what amazes me? The Old

Testament is a story that is almost monotonous, where the same theme is over and over again. It is the theme of God's long suffering, kindness, patience and mercy, as we see in the theme and the refrain in the Book of Judges.

Read it, it's like a broken record. And Israel did what was wicked in the sight of the Lord. And so God delivered them into the hands of the Philistines. And the people of Israel cried unto God for deliverance. And God raised up Samson.

And Samson comes and he slays the Philistines and he liberates his people. And all the people celebrate and praise the Lord. And then what's the next line? And Israel did what was wicked in the sight of the Lord. He sends them prophets, they kill the prophets, he sends them his son, they kill his son.

But the normal way in which God behaves is to be patient and long suffering and merciful. Now here's Koman's thesis. He said, it seems to him that what God does when he sees everyone taking this for granted, that every now and then, instead of mercy, he will visit his people with instant justice to remind them of his mercy.

The same question bothered disciples of Jesus. And they came to Jesus and they're raising questions like this. They said, Jesus, where was God when Pilate mixed the blood of the sacrifices with the Galileans?

Where was God when the temple of Salome fell and killed 18 innocent people who were standing on the street minding their own business. They weren't playing sidewalk Superintendent. They weren't heckling people. They're just walking down the street, minding their business. And when this accident takes place and wipes them out.

What did Jesus say? He said, hey, take it easy. Look, everybody makes mistakes. I know that, I said. And the Bible says that he will keep it. Israel neither Slumbers nor sleeps. But don't you see

that's poetic? That's hyperbole. Even my father has to take a nap from time to time. And this one afternoon, while he was just taking a well deserved rest, the temple fell.

I'll try to get him some solmanex. And I'll ask him to be more vigilant in the future. Is that what he said? Or maybe he said, Remember I told you about the Providence of my father? How a bird never lands on the Earth, but that my father notices it and that he numbers the very hairs on your head.

But this one particular afternoon, there was this bushy haired fellow. And my father was so concentrating on the hairs of his head that he overlooked this falling temple. But I promise you we will be more careful in the future. That is not what Jesus said. What Jesus said was this, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Now, what does our Lord say there? What does he mean? But that's a tough saying, isn't it? You comfort comfort. You witness a tragedy. Maybe it was one of your close friends was just crushed by that falling temple. And you come and you ask for an explanation. Why did this happen? And instead of tenderness, instead of comfort that you expect from Jesus, he says, Accept you repent, you will all likewise perish. You know what Jesus is saying i think? I think really what he's saying to them is you people are asking me the wrong question.

The question that you should be asking me is, Teacher, why didn't that temple fall on my head? That's the question. Tell you a little secret. Teaching theology for 20 years. All kinds of students, all kinds of life situation, all kinds of places with a jillion questions. And that's great because that's how we learn asking questions, right?

And one of the tricks of being a professor, once you see the light come on in some students face and they ask you a question like what happens to the poor, innocent [inadudible] in Africa who's never heard the gospel? [Please turn the tape to side 2]. 20 years. All kinds of students, all kinds

of life situation, all kinds of places with a jillion questions. And that's great because that's how we learn asking questions, right? And one of the tricks of being a professor, once you see the light come on in some students face and they ask you a question like, what happens to the poor, innocent native in Africa who's never heard the gospel?

And I have to treat that as if it were the first time anybody asked that question. That's the trick about being a sensitive teacher. How many times do you think I've heard that question? Ten jillion, ten jillion times. I've heard all kinds of questions.

Only once have I heard had a student come up to me and say, the thing that I just can't figure out theologically, is why would God really save me? That doesn't seem to puzzle us, does it?

Somehow, deep inside we think that he owes it to us that heaven wouldn't quite be heaven if we were excluded from him.

Though we think it's very nice that God sent his son to die across for us. There's part of us that kind of said, Well, yeah, of course. God is love and he's just. And if he really cares about me, he'll certainly redeem me. We're not really bothered by it. What bothers us is God's Justice. The real theme song of the Christian Church today is amazing justice. How cruel the sound that harms these innocent people.

Let me say this. There is no one in this room, who has never, excuse me, who has not at some time in their lives been a victim of injustice. And there's no one in this room who has not been guilty of committing an injustice against another person. We have all done it, haven't we? We have all violated other people, and we know what it's like to be violated by other people. I can remember when I was a kid, knowing nothing of Christ, I got in a lot of trouble at school. And when I got in trouble for something that I did, I didn't like it, but I could handle it.

But, boy, when I got blamed for something that I didn't do, I just couldn't stand that. I would be enraged. If I were arrested tonight for a crime I did not commit. I would be furious. Even though, you know, you've broken the civil law enough times to send you away for ten years. It was just on how many times you broke the speed limit. If the rules were applied scrupulously to everybody in this room, none of us would have a driver's license, would we? I know I wouldn't. But somehow, whenever we receive mercy, we think it's owed to us. Now, I think one of the greatest problems in theological thinking in the Church, never mind outside the Church, is this problem, a confusion of justice and mercy. Mercy, by definition, is voluntary, at least in God's point. We're required to be merciful. But God is never required to be merciful to anybody. God is never obligated to be merciful to you or to anybody else. His supreme executive privilege is this. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy. That is my right.

I owe mercy to no one. If God is ever required to be merciful. If you think that God is required to be merciful, let that buzzer go off in your brain and say, Whoops I'm confused. Because as soon as I think that mercy is required.

I'm not thinking about mercy anymore, am I? Because the very essence of mercy. Is in its voluntary, unrequired character. Now, I said a moment ago. That everybody in this room. Has been a victim of injustice. And you know how painful that is. But every injustice that you have suffered in this world. Has been strictly on a horizontal plane. There is no one in this world. Who has ever received a single ounce of injustice with respect to God vertically. Now, that's difficult, isn't it? Because if I see injustice going on among men. I can't just step back and say, K Surah, Surah, this is the sovereignty of God working out here. God commands me to work for justice. The prophetic voice is clear.

Let justice roll down like an everflowing stream. We are to be Apostles of justice. If you're a victim of injustice, we're to work to correct that. And we're certainly not to be perpetrators of injustice.

But though I wrongly accuse you, or you wrongly slander me, and I cry for God to vindicate me, I can go in God and prayer and say that man is spreading vicious rumors about me that are not true, I have not done anything to hurt that man, and yet he is attacking me. God, please vindicate me. Doesn't Jesus encourage us to pray that. That God will vindicate us from false charges, from false accusations?

Yet at the same time, I have to say, God, I know that I am innocent with respect to that man. And that man has no right to do to me what he's doing. But what did you have in mind? I can never point my finger that way and say, hey, God, how could you let that happen to me?

Can the judge of all the world do wrong? You know the answer to that question. But our problem as Christians. Is that we have lost our capacity to be surprised at mercy.

I think that we ought to change the words. To a song that comes from My Fair Lady. And just change the song of Rex Harrison just a tad. We've grown accustomed to his Grace. And we take it for granted. The best illustration I know of this, and I'll close with it. That I've ever lived through was when I was given an assignment to teach at a Christian College in New England. And I had to teach introduction of the Old Testament to 250 freshmen in one class. Can you imagine that? What a nightmare.

And opening day of class. I had to go hand out this course syllabus. And explain all the assignments for the course. And I said, Look, I want everything to be clear here. Let's get it all settled today.

I said, you have three little term papers, five pages each, little book reports due during the course of the semester. And here are the rules. The first one is due September 30 at 12:00 on my desk. Which is in room such and such. It's got to be there by 12:00 noon unless you are physically confined to the hospital or there is a death in the immediate family.

Otherwise you're dealing with Philadelphia lawyers, right? 250 of them. I said, Is that clear? Is that agree? Oh, yes.

I said, the second paper, October 33. When? November 30. Agreed? Agreed.

Okay. September 30 comes up, 225 students dutifully come in with their turnpiper. 25 of them are like the foolish virgins outside the door, weeping and gnashing their teeth. And they come in there the picture of contrition. Oh, professor Sproul.

We didn't make the adjustment properly from high school to College. We didn't budget our time. Please don't give us an F. I told them, you don't have to pay for there on time it's an F. They said, please give us a little bit more time. I said, all right, I give you two days extension. But this is the last time. Don't do it again. October 30.

That paper better be on my desk. Oh, it will be. Thank you so much.

Okay, I really don't need to finish the story, but I will. October the 30th, 200 students come with their term paper. 50 of them don't have it. Where are your term papers? Oh, professor, this is midterm. Everybody's given exams this week. All our term papers are due at once. Please give us one more chance.

All right, pussy cat. I said, all right, but this is the last time. I said, you do it again, you flunk, right? I said, Right. I said, okay, I'll give you two more days. You know what they did? Literally, spontaneously, without a leader. They began to sing, We Love You Prof Sproul, oh, yes, we do. There was a rock in the cradle of the room. They did. I was Mr. Super, nice, professor. Right?

November the 30th, hundred of them come with their term papers. 150 of them breeze in without them. Where's your turnpapers? Hey, Prof, don't worry. Well, for you, a couple of days, no sweat.

Got you covered. I said, Johnson, Where's your term paper? He said, hey, man, I don't have it today, but I have it for you Monday. Took out my pen, I said, Josh, F. Marquette, Where's your paper? I don't have it, F.

Now you tell me what their reaction was. Unmitigated Fury. And what do you think were the words that they shouted out? That not fair. I said, oh, God forbid that I should be unfair to you, Johnson, did I just hear you say, that's not fair?

He said, yeah. He said, It's Justice that you want. I said, Weren't you late last night? Yes, sir. I said, Fine, let's make it fair. I give you an F for the lies. I said, Anybody else want Justice? No, sir. I say to my students, don't ever ask God for justice. You might get it. We have to understand what Grace is. And in order to understand what Grace is we must first understand. And in order to understand what justice is, we have to understand what Holiness is.

I said I was going to close with one last point. Can I have one last real quick? Here's the way I look at it, when I look at the New Testament, I see the most severe expression of God's wrath that I find anywhere in the Bible. In the New Testament, the only time in all of biblical history where an innocent person suffers is in the New Testament on the cross. But even then, that suffering is not visited upon Jesus until he willingly takes upon himself our sin.

And once he does that in and of himself, he deserves no punishment. But once he carries that burden of sin, he becomes the most obscene creature in all of creation. More evil concentrated and him at that moment than at any moment in human history. And God damns it, which is the

clearest expression of justice we ever see in the Bible. Yet at the same time, the most astonishing picture of mercy in that somebody else takes what justice demands for me.

And yet God still talks about sending people to hell. And that's the talk about hard sayings. It's an amazing thing that almost everything that we learn in the Bible about hell in the New Testament comes from the lips of Jesus. Do you ever wonder about that? I'm guessing here. But I guess the reason why that is, is that God knew that we couldn't hear of it from anyone less than Jesus himself.

Jesus believed in hell, and he taught it. That is the hardest thing for me to bear. I can't stand the thought of anybody going to hell. Can you really enjoy that? And so I asked myself, why is it? Think of this. The next time you struggle with the Holiness of God, think of the person that you can conjure up as the most wicked person you can imagine. Let it be Adolf Hitler for the purposes of illustration.

And then think of the person that you conceive of as the most righteous, most sanctified Christian who ever lived in his world, apart from Jesus. Maybe it's the Apostle Paul. Let's take those two people, Paul and Hitler. Okay, here's Paul. Here's Hitler. And there's Jesus over there. Got it? Jesus, Paul and Hitler. Now, if we're going to measure the gap of righteousness among these three people, is the gap between Paul and Jesus? Bigger or smaller than the gap between Paul and Hitler?

There's no contest, is it? Do you realize that the most sanctified human being that ever walked this Earth is a million times closer in character to Adolf Hitler than he is to Jesus Christ? Where are our sympathies with a Holy God? Do we really want to see a Holy God vindicated in the death of the wicked? No because we're the wicked. There are comrades in sin. Hitler I can

understand. Jesus that's another story. All of the theology that we do and think we do as sinners. That's our bias.

But while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us that's his Grace. Our Father and our God forgive us for how quickly we forget what you have done for us freely and voluntarily. Father, forgive us when we slander you with our mouths and accuse you of things that we might do but that you would never do.

Forgive us for charging you with the same kind of injustice and violation of people that we commend and forgive us for the unspeakable arrogance of ever even thinking that you haven't loved this enough.

Thank you, Lord, for your mercy.