

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 2/17/02 Brad Brandt

Leviticus 10:1-3; 2 Samuel 6:1-11 "When God Doesn't Seem Fair" **

Main Idea: Today we want to tackle two difficult to explain texts from God's Word that illustrate God's holiness. They also help us respond to situations when God doesn't seem fair.

I. Keep in mind two illustrations of God's holiness.

A. Nadab & Abihu experienced His holiness (Leviticus 10:1-3).

1. God judges holy men by a higher standard.
2. There is no such thing as a small sin.

B. Uzzah experienced His holiness (2 Samuel 6:1-11).

1. Uzzah was guilty of presumption.
2. He presumed he knew better than God what was best for the ark.
3. We're in big trouble when we tamper with God's Word.

II. Keep in mind the implications of God's holiness.

A. A holy God must deal justly with sin.

1. The amazing thing is not that God took the lives of Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah for their sins.

2. The amazing thing is that God doesn't do the same with us when we sin.

B. God does not owe us mercy.

1. We tend to think that because God is longsuffering, He's not offended.
2. God will deal with sin—in His time.

C. Don't presume upon the patience of God.

1. There's only one person with whom God was "unfair."
2. His name is Jesus Christ.
3. God treated Him the way we deserve to be treated.

The Bottom Line: The most significant thing about God is His holiness.

There are some passages in the Bible that are difficult to explain. If we're honest, and if we've spent any time whatsoever reading the Bible, we've wondered why God allowed certain things to happen as they did.

Why would God completely obliterate humanity by a universal flood, except for Noah and his family? Why would He instruct the Israelites to destroy thousands of people when they moved into the Promised Land? Read through Joshua and you see city after city mowed down in a holy war (Jericho, Ai, Hazor)—all by God's command.

Why would God tell Saul to utterly destroy the people of Amalek in 1 Samuel 15—men, women, children, and even animals? And why was Samuel so upset when he found out that Saul spared King Agag? Didn't Saul do the merciful thing? Why did Samuel proceed to take Agag's life with the sword?

Why would God take the lives of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5? All they did was tell a little lie? They probably had given more money to the church than a lot of people.

Is God fair? Think of the alternative. Is He unfair? Of course, He's not *unfair*. How then do we make sense of the events of life that don't seem fair to us?

I believe the next statement is the key that unlocks the mystery (notice I didn't say it *answers* the mystery, but *unlocks* it—I will not presume to give a trite solution to a complex question). Here it is. We'll never make sense out of life until we come to grips with this truth. *God is holy*. In fact, I would suggest to you that God's greatest attribute is his *holiness*.

What does it mean to say that God is holy? It means that He is unique. He is in a class all by Himself. He isn't holy because of what He does. He is holy because of who He is. He determines what holiness and righteousness and justice is.

Today we want to tackle two difficult to explain texts from God's Word (or should I say, allow these two texts to "tackle us") that illustrate God's holiness. They also help us know how to respond to situations *when God doesn't seem fair*. When God doesn't seem fair, we need to keep in mind two things...

I. Keep in mind two illustrations of God's holiness.

The first is the relatively unknown text of Leviticus 10. It's there that...

A. Nadab & Abihu experienced His holiness (Leviticus 10:1-3). Do you remember who Nadab and Abihu were and what happened to them? Allow me to sketch the background.

In eternity past God chose a special people to be the object of His love. About four thousand years ago He entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12). The book of Exodus records how God redeemed the Israelites from Egypt. He gave them a Worship Manual of sorts, the book of Leviticus. In the book of Leviticus, God explained two key truths for His people. One, He is Holy. And two, to approach Him you must come on *His terms*, not your own. In fact, in Leviticus He prescribed in detail how His people were to relate to Him.

The Lord designated certain men to represent the people in their relationship with Him. They were the priests. God gave the priesthood to Moses' brother, Aaron, and to his descendants.

Leviticus 8-9 is the record of the ordination day for Aaron and his sons as the priests of Israel. It was an exciting, joyful day. The priests led the people in worship by offering a great sacrifice. And God showed His pleasure in an unforgettable fashion, as explained in Leviticus 9:23-24: "Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. ²⁴ Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown."

The glory of the Lord appeared. Fire came from God. It was quite a sight.

But something else happened that ordination day. To appreciate its significance we must look back at a specific phrase that directed how the priests were to do their service. We see it in Leviticus 9:7, "*as the LORD commanded*." We see it throughout chapter 8, "*as the LORD commanded*" (8:4, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 36).

The priests weren't to "wing it." God told them exactly what He wanted them to do, and how to do it. By the way, never forget this. It's not up to men to decide how to approach a holy God.

Watch what happened next in Leviticus 10:1, " Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command."

That's strange. *Unauthorized fire*. What happened next? Notice 10:2, "So fire came out from the presence of the LORD [just like in 9:24, but certainly different in its effect...] and consumed them, and they died before the LORD."

Wow! Fire came from heaven and obliterated Aaron's sons.

You say, "Wait a minute. Wasn't God a little hard on the boys? It was their ordination day. And after all, boys will be boys! What's wrong with a little adolescent prank? True, the boys let their curiosity get the best of them, and true, they were a little out of line, but fire from heaven? Isn't that a little unfair? Was God really fair

in what he did to Nadab and Abihu?"

How do you think Aaron felt? These were his sons! This was perhaps one of the most significant days in his life. To see his own flesh and blood, his own sons, following in his steps. A life of service to God lay ahead of them. What great potential!

But in one quick moment, their lives were snuffed out. Finished. Gone.

I can imagine Aaron going to Moses, and saying, "What's going on Moses?! What kind of a God is this? It's not fair Moses!"

Listen to what Moses said to his brother Aaron. Verse 3—"Moses then said to Aaron, 'This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: "Among those who approach me I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored."

Take a close look at what Moses told Aaron. Here's how the KJV puts what God said, "I will be sanctified in them that come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified." God did what He did because of His holiness.

You say, "What had Nadab and Abihu done?" They may be several contributing factors. For starters, based on the prohibition that follows in verses 8-11, they may have been under the influence of alcohol. In addition, they possibly made the offering at a time other than the time prescribed by God. God set up specific times for offerings. Furthermore, perhaps they pressed within the veil and looked into the Holy of Holies. Verse 1 does say they made their offering "*before the Lord*." That was off limits.

What I've just said is conjecture. But of this there is certainty. The text says they offered "unauthorized fire" [KJV "strange fire"].

What made the fire "unauthorized" or "strange?" The priests made incense by mixing aromatic spices together. They vaporized these spices by putting them in a sensor containing glowing lumps of charcoal (fire). According to Leviticus 16:12 these coals had to be taken from the altar. Had the sons obtained the fire from somewhere else?

The objection is made, "Fire is fire. What difference does it make where you get it? What's the big deal?" The final words of verse 1 tell us, "*contrary to his command*."

There's the problem. Nadab and Abihu disobeyed. And God judged them, instantly.

Was God unfair? Was He unjust and whimsical? Was it a "little" thing? No. God had already told them ahead of time what would happen. Exodus 19:22, "Even the priests, who approach the LORD, must consecrate themselves, or the LORD will break out against them."

Listen. The closer a person is to God, the more attention he must pay to holiness. Allow me to mention a couple of practical observations...

1. *God judges holy men by a higher standard.* As priests, Nadab and Abihu should have known better than to act so presumptuously. They were supposed to be *holy men*.

2. *There is no such thing as a small sin.* For one "small" sin, Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land. Why not? God told him in Numbers 20:12, "Because you did not believe Me, to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Israelites." Elisha's servant, Gehazi, was struck with leprosy for one sin. So was Uzziah.

How did Aaron respond after Moses reminded him of God's holiness? Verse 3 says, "Aaron remained silent."

There was nothing he could say (see Ps 39:9). God was just.

You say, "What does this mean for us?" We'll get to the implications, but first another illustration of the significance of God's holiness.

B. Uzzah experienced His holiness (2 Samuel 6:1-11). Do you remember Uzzah? Let me sketch the backdrop. It's about ten centuries B.C.

David is the newly appointed king of Israel. One of his first executive decisions is to move the ark of God to Jerusalem. The ark was a significant box-like piece of furniture that represented the presence of a holy God. It had been captured in battle by the Philistines, who later returned it. When David took office, the ark was being stored in the town of Kiriath-jearim.

David and a large procession went to the house of Abinadab (3) to get the ark. What an exciting day it was! David wanted to start his rule as king on the right foot. He wanted to make sure God was honored. While the assembly made the ten mile trek with the ark, they played musical instruments and praised God with a great celebration (5).

The festivity ended abruptly. Something tragic happened when they reached Chidon (1 Chr 13:9). The ark was resting on a cart which was being pulled by oxen. The cart hit a bump in the road. The ark tottered. A man named Uzzah was walking beside the cart. When he saw that the ark was going to fall, he instinctively reached out his hand to steady the ark.

What happened? Did God announce from heaven, "Thank you, Uzzah!" No. 2 Samuel 6:7 tells us, "The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God."

Again the objection comes, "Hold on! Just how do you explain that? It sure seems to me that Uzzah tried to do right, and got zapped for it! What kind of God is that? Was He just?"

Hold on. The fact is, He is just. And He was just in His actions here. I want to show you a couple of significant details that play an important part in this tragedy. Here's one. According to verse 3, they set the ark on a "new cart."

"So what?" you ask. "What's the problem with using a cart to transport the ark? How else would they move it? There weren't any U-haul trucks! What's the problem?"

The problem is that God already told the Israelites how to transport the ark. In fact, He gave them precise instructions. And using a cart was not one of them. The ark was to be carried. It had loops on the sides (Ex 25:10). Poles were to be slipped through the loops. The ark was to be carried.

Why then was the ark being transported on a cart? I don't know. Maybe because that's the way the Philistines had sent it back (see 1 Sam 6). Apparently the Israelites thought it was no big deal. "Why have men carry that heavy ark on their shoulders when we can stick it on a cart, and let oxen do the work?"

Look out when you think you know better than God! "I don't need church. I can worship God on my own." Who says? "I'm not happy with my spouse any more. I would be happier and could serve God better if I found a new partner." "Things are tight this month. God won't mind if I don't give my tithes and offerings. He'll understand."

Really? My friend, be careful. Don't impose your opinions on God. That's dangerous.

Just what is sin? Someone has rightly observed,

*"Man call is an accident, God calls it abomination.
Man calls it a defect, God calls it a disease.
Man calls it an error, God calls it an enmity.
Man calls it a liberty, God calls it lawlessness.
Man calls it a trifle, God calls it a tragedy.
Man calls it a mistake, God calls it a madness.
Man calls it a weakness, God calls it willfulness."*

W. S. Plummer is right, "We never see sin aright until we see it as against God...All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught...Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, "I have sinned;" but the returning prodigal said, "I have sinned against heaven and before thee;" and David said, "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned."

Notice another significant detail in the account. Verse 7 again—God smote Uzzah for his "irreverent act" ["error," KJV].

You say, "I don't get it. What irreverent act? What's the problem?"

The problem is that God had given His people precise instructions on how to move the ark. In fact, if you'll check out Numbers 4, you'll see that God designated the Kohathites with the responsibility for transporting the tabernacle and its contents, including the ark. Kohath was a son of Levi. His descendants were responsible to take care of the sacred vessels.

Realize that from childhood, the Kohathites were trained on how to do their job. And rule #1 was this, "Never, never, ever touch the ark of God!" Numbers 4:15 stated clearly, "...When the camp is ready to move, the Kohathites are to come to do the carrying. But they must not touch the holy things *or they will die...*"

Every Kohathite was drilled in this. Don't touch the ark. That included Uzzah.

Why then did Uzzah touch the ark? Apparently, he assumed something. What? When he saw the cart hit the bump, and the ark begin to topple, he looked at the ground—the dirty, dusty, muddy ground. In an instant he thought to himself, "The ark will get dirty if it falls on the ground. I'll reach out and steady it with my hand."

That was Uzzah's problem. He *assumed*. Actually, he *presumed*.

1. *Uzzah was guilty of presumption.*

2. *He presumed he knew better than God what was best for the ark.* He presumed his hands were less defiled than the mud. He presumed.

But God had already made it quite clear. According to Numbers 4:15, no human hands are to touch My ark. Why not? Because human hands are defiled by sin.

The sin of presumption led to Uzzah's death. Let that sink in...

3. *We're in big trouble when we tamper with God's Word.* God said what He meant and meant what He said.

Imagine all the obstacles a person might have to overcome if he were to walk from New York City to San Francisco. One man who accomplished this rare achievement mentioned a rather surprising difficulty when asked to tell of his biggest hurdle. He said that the toughest part of the trip wasn't traversing the steep slopes of the mountains or crossing hot, dry, barren stretches of desert. Instead, he said, "The thing that came the closest to defeating me was the sand in my shoes."

Beware of the little things. Indeed, there are no "little things" when it comes to obedience. A flirting look. A white lie. A shady business deal. It's so easy to tamper with God's Word to justify our actions. And so costly.

You say, "I haven't seen God strike anybody down recently." Maybe not. But nonetheless, there is a cost involved, as we'll see next.

What should we do when we find ourselves questioning the fairness of God?

First, keep in mind two illustrations of God's holiness. Remember what happened to Nadab and Abihu, and then what happened to Uzzah. Then do this...

II. Keep in mind the implications of God's holiness.

What are the implications? Here are three...

A. A holy God must deal justly with sin. Don't miss this. Incidents like what happened to Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, and Uzzah in 2 Samuel 6 are like bells that ring one message loud and clear. *Sin is a big deal to God.* Why? Because God is *holy*. His holiness demands that He deal justly with sin. To put it bluntly...

1. *The amazing thing is not that God took the lives of Nadab and Abihu and Uzzah for their sins.* Rather...
2. *The amazing thing is that He doesn't do the same with us when we sin.* That's what is staggering!

Did any other priests ever violate God's commands like Nadab and Abihu did? Yes, they did. In fact, they did it time and time again in Israel's history.

Did God consume their lives instantly as in the case of Nadab and Abihu? No, He didn't.

Does that mean He was unfair with Nadab and Abihu? Absolutely not.

God's normal pattern in the Bible is to put up with sinners. Time and time again He is patient, merciful, and longsuffering. But periodically, God reminds us of His holiness by sudden, swift deeds of justice.

Do you know what our problem is? We expect God to be merciful.

A socialist once came to see Andrew Carnegie and soon was railing against the injustice of Carnegie having so much money. In his view, wealth was meant to be divided equally. Carnegie asked his secretary for an assessment of everything he owned and at the same time looked up the figures on world population. He did a little arithmetic on a pad and then said to his secretary. "Give this gentleman 16 cents. That's his share of my wealth."

Most of us have unspoken expectations, and that includes what we expect of God. We expect God's mercy. But know this. If we got what we deserved from God, we might be surprised. Here's why—it's implication #2 of God's holiness...

B. God does not owe us mercy. R.C. Sproul tells the story of an Old Testament survey class he taught. There were 250 students. In the syllabus, he stated the requirements in black and white. There would be three papers, due Sept 30, Oct 30, and Nov 30. If a paper was not turned in on time, there would be an automatic "F".

When the first paper was due, ten people were not ready. They pleaded for mercy. "Please!" they said. And the prof gave an extension.

The next time 25 were not ready. Another plea, and another extension.

The third time, 50 people didn't have their papers done. This time, no mercy. Professor Sproul said, "If you don't have a paper to turn in, you get an F." One student blurted out, "That's not fair!" Sproul replied, "Ok, if you want what's fair, then you get an "F" for this paper, *and* an "F" for the others you turned in late as well."

And there was silence.

Please never forget this. First, a Holy God must deal with sin. Second, God does not owe us mercy. Let's be honest with ourselves...

1. *We tend to think that because God is longsuffering, He's not offended.* That He doesn't care. That sin is not that big of a deal. But God is offended. He does care. Sin is a big deal to Him. And...

2. *God will deal with sin—in His time.* And when He does His actions will be just and right. Which brings us to the third implication...

C. Don't presume upon the patience of God.

Is God unfair? Listen. If God were totally "fair" and acted solely on the basis of justice, not one of us would be here. Friend, never say to God, "Lord, I demand justice! Give me justice!" If God gave us what we deserved for just one moment, we would all be cast from His presence into hell.

"Is God unfair?" you ask. Ponder this...

1. *There's only one person in the history of this world with whom God was "unfair."* Do you know who that was?

2. *His name is Jesus Christ.* What God the Father did to Him was not fair. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor 5:21)." Simply put, here's what that means...

3. *God treated Him the way we deserve to be treated.* On the Cross, God treated His own Son as we deserve to be treated. He placed our sin upon Him. Then He exploded the fury of His righteous wrath against Him until the demands of His righteousness were met.

You say, "That's unthinkable." Yes, it is. That's why it's called the *good news*.

If you want to be right with God, you can be. But you must come on His terms.

*Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone; Thou must save and Thou alone.*

*Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress, helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly, wash me, Savior, or I die!*

And indeed, if we trust in Jesus Christ, God does wash us, no matter who we are or what we have done.

But that's not all. Not only did God treat His Son the way we deserve to be treated, but if we accept His gift, He then treats us the way His Son deserves to be treated. We become "joint heirs" with Jesus Christ (see Gal 4:7). *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.*

A holy God must deal with sin, all sin. God does not owe us mercy. Don't presume upon His mercy.

The fact is, we'll never appreciate the splendor of the gospel until we grasp how undeserving we are of it. Yes, God is loving. But foremost, He is holy. Before a person will ever admit his need for a Savior, he must admit the truth about himself.

[See illustration about the trial of Adolf Eichmann, in Colson, *The Body*,187]

The Bottom Line: The most significant thing about God is His holiness.

Do you want to make sense out of life? I encourage you to start by acknowledging that God is Holy. Get a handle on God's holiness, and the cast yourself wholly upon Christ.