

WHO are the Wicked & the Righteous in Scripture?

A Study by
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Part One: Some Scripture Facts

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It appears that there are a variety of opinions on this subject, which is important because it frames our views on God's purposes in election and providence, as well as man's appropriation of God's promises. Strangely, it seems that some (many?) Calvinists are at the forefront of opposing *particularity* at this point, believing that scripture points to a universal application of grace, favour and loving kindness (though not in an everlasting sense) to all people. To resolve this, we must investigate what the Bible says the wicked and righteous really are.

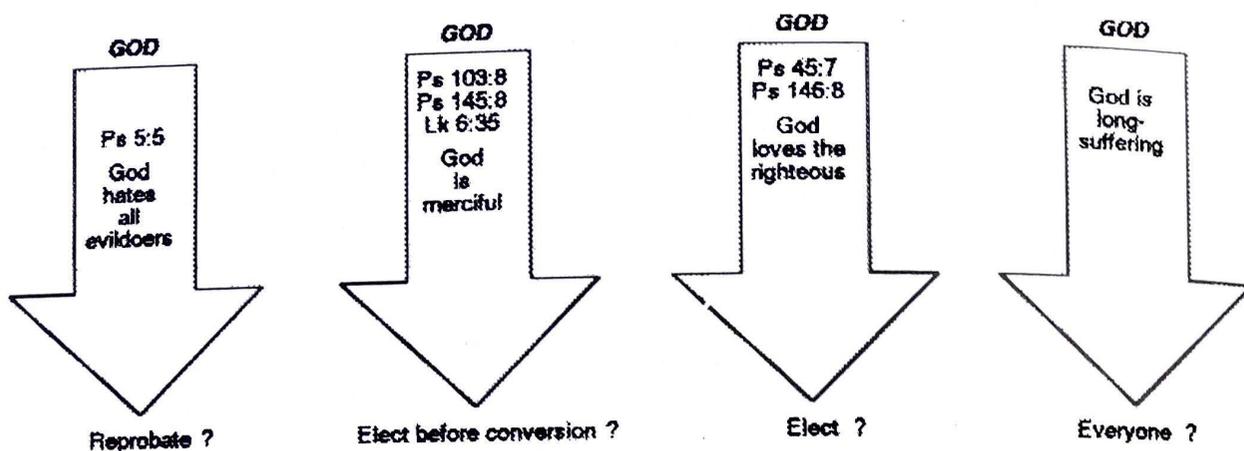
Options

- The righteous are the elect *in Christ* & the wicked are the reprobate.
- Those who are actually morally good or bad at that specific time, elect or reprobate.
 - * The righteous are the effectually called and justified.
 - * The wicked are the reprobate and the elect.

In the case of the elect, the title 'wicked' means either:
a) the elect before conversion or
b) the elect viewed as committing sin in their old nature.

It is appropriate to view the ramifications of these options in diagrammatic form before we examine the actual Scripture texts.

Diagrams overleaf.



Why is this important?

It has very great import regarding:

- **the ability of man.** If God is addressing the reprobate doing 'good' works whenever he approves of good actions (e.g. the man not: *sitting in the seat of scoffers* - Ps 1:1), then the reprobate can be blessed and receive grace from God. If God is gracious to the reprobate, then we have salvation by works. A wicked man can receive some kind of grace from God because he did something worthy. This is not Biblical. The promises of God would thus become founded upon works, fleshly effort, even in believers, instead of grace and the power of the Spirit working in us.
- **The love of God for all/only some people.** If the wicked and the righteous are not generic terms for the elect and the reprobate, then we have texts supporting a love of God for all. A reprobate man doing a 'righteous' deed could be approved by God and yet still be sent to hell later.
- **A conditional covenant.** If God addresses all men indiscriminately with promises of blessing, then the covenant becomes conditional, not by faith in a federal substitute. Personal obedience secures blessing.
- **Limited atonement,** is turned upon its head and becomes unlimited, except by the faith and works of a man.
- **Common or particular grace.** If the wicked are not the just reprobate, then there is a grace of God applicable to everyone indiscriminately. In order for this presumed grace to be distinguished from saving grace, it has to be called 'common grace', yet there is no such Biblical distinction.
- **A subjective viewpoint.** Who decides what is righteous? Appealing to the law is not enough. If a reprobate person does not steal or covet, is

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he righteous? Of course not. Why, because the doctrine of Total Depravity reveals that his 'good' deeds are intrinsically evil.

Scriptural Facts

1. Some people are clearly elect who are nevertheless frequently pictured in the Old Testament as being actually sinful. Despite their sin, God dealt bountifully with them, e.g.: Jacob, Rahab, David. Their inheritance in the covenant did not rest upon their moral condition. In fact some, like Jacob, are declared to be chosen before they were able to do anything at all, good or bad. The blessing rested on relationship initiated by God, not their moral condition. They inherited the portion of *the righteous man* even though they were not actually righteous.

• **Point:** *A person can look wicked and yet be classed with the righteous.*

2. The outward appearance of covenant blessings is not necessarily an indication of real covenant relationship. Psalm 73 shows that although the wicked prospered, their end was destruction.

• **Point:** *A person can appear to be blessed, with the prosperous, material blessing of the righteous, and still be foreign to the covenant.*

3. This means that covenant relationship cannot rest upon outward actions. In addition we see that scripture clearly teaches this principle both in the Old and New Testaments.¹ 'The just shall live by faith.'

4. The New Testament must be allowed to explain the Old. The righteous man described in the Old Testament promises is Christ. He inherits all the covenant blessings. No one else is sufficiently righteous in God's eyes. Galatians 3 makes this clear. The Abrahamic covenant (which rested upon grace) passed to Christ as the true offspring of Abraham (3:16). The inheritance is not by law (i.e. works, 3:18). We are all (all the elect) sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus (3:26), heirs according to promise (3:29).

5. This means that **the statements regarding the righteous man are speaking of Christ, and all who are in him - the elect.** It cannot mean anything else. The promises are made to those who are righteous, but no one is righteous enough except Christ. The Old Testament promises are for the elect. This is why sinners like Jacob could receive God's blessing; they were seen as in Christ.

6. If this is true, and if there is a clear distinction drawn between the righteous and the wicked in the Old Testament promises, then the wicked must be the non-elect, the reprobate. It cannot refer to the elect before their conversion, because many people inherited covenant blessings before there was any appearance of faith (e.g. Jacob). They were treated as elect before their effectual calling.

¹ **Negatively:** Rm 3:9, 20, 23, 5:12; Ps 143:2. **Positively:** Rm 1:17, 3:21-22, 26, 28.

Disputed Texts: Does God show grace and love to the wicked?

There are very few texts appealed to in order to support an idea of God's gracious dealings with the reprobate, while there are very many which show that God's only dealing with them is condemnation. It has been said that this is because God did not want to encourage complacency in the reprobate, but that, nevertheless, God's intention to bless them is sincere. In my view this is a very weak argument. There is not even one clear, undisputed text to set against the many declaring God's hatred for the wicked.² A careful consideration of these texts is called for.

Ps 103:8

The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

This verse does not say that God loves, or is gracious to the wicked. There is no question that this verse is referring to elect, covenant people (v18). The Psalm makes a distinction between his sons who fear him (v13) and the natural man whose days are like grass (v15); between those who know his ways and those who only see his acts (v7). The steadfast love of the Lord is upon those who fear him (v17). God's love is not said to be upon anyone else. The Psalm is a response of a righteous, redeemed man (v3-4) to this loving God who forgives iniquity (v3) and is merciful to his children (v13).

Ps 145:8-9

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

There are insufficient exegetical grounds to explain away the 'all' here as only referring to God's *works* based on a parallelism with verse 10. The whole context as well as the simple sense of the verses include people. Verses 10, 15-16 insist that we must see all human beings here. We cannot avoid the fact that this Psalm says that God is good to all; but what does this mean?

Firstly, the Psalm itself distinguishes between a providential goodness which supplies food (v15-16), through the giving of sunshine and rain, and a covenantal graciousness and mercy. It is this providential goodness which is referred to in v9.

Secondly, the Psalm distinguishes between the wicked (v20) and those that fear God, the elect (v19), those who call upon him (v18). The Lord is good in providen-

² For example: Ps 5:4-5, 11:5-6, 34:21, 37:20, 37:38, 45:7; Prov 3:33; Mal 1:2-3; Rm 9:11-13.

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tial supply to *all* people, everyone. (In Hebrew this is further emphasised as a distinct group by using the definite article *the all*.) But God is gracious and merciful only to some. This distinction is repeatedly seen in the Psalm. God is only near to those who cry to him and love him, but the wicked he destroys (v19-20). All men proclaim God's mighty acts, seen objectively as terrible (v 6): but those in relationship to the Lord (e.g. : David, the writer of this Psalm) declare God's greatness (v 6). A generation declares God's acts and mighty works (v 4) but David meditates on these acts and sees the glorious splendour of God's majesty (v 5). It is the saints who bless God (v 10)- not said of ordinary men. In fact these saints make known to men God's deeds and the glory of his kingdom (v 12).

Thirdly, the psalm does not say that God loves the wicked, that God is merciful to the wicked, that God loves everyone. Phrases like these do not exist.

Fourthly, God is good. A perfect God, who is love, maintains the world he has created until the day of his wrath and judgment. As a God of purpose, he will not cease to supply food in general terms until the times comes in his plan for a reckoning with mankind. Food supply is, therefore, a fruit of God's loving kindness. This providence is not an indication of a desire to save.

The terms used in verse 8 are covenantal, (in the Hebrew: *chesed* = steadfast love), but the terms used in v. 9 are not, (Heb. '*rachamim* = kindness, compassion, pity). Verse 8 is applicable to the elect alone and verse 9 to all people generally.³

³ The following technical data undergirding these assertions has been collated from the KJV/Strong's Code/ Notes from Strong's Abridged edition of the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon and Whitaker's Revision of the same Lexicon. The data pertains to Psalm 145:8-9 since this Psalm is regularly used as the strongest proof of God's love and grace to all men indiscriminately. A careful analysis reveals that there are two distinct people in view here: the elect and the reprobate.

H2617 Hebrew רַחֲמִים *chesed* = common noun masc. singular: goodness, kindness, faithfulness.

I. Of man: *kindness* (especially as extended to the lowly, needy and miserable), *mercy*; (rarely) *affection of Israel to God, love to God, piety, lovely appearance*.

II. Of God: *kindness, lovingkindness* in condescending to the needs of His creatures. **1.** Specifically lovingkindness: **a.** *in redemption from enemies and troubles.* **b.** *in preservation of life from death.* **c.** *in quickening of spiritual life.* **d.** *in redemption from sin.* **e.** *in keeping the covenants, with Abraham; with Moses and Israel; with David and his dynasty; with the wife Zion.* **2.** 'Chesed' is found grouped with other divine attributes: e.g.: *loving kindness and fidelity.* **3.** the kindness of God is **a.** *abundant.* **b.** *great in extent.*

God's attitude to this group of people is further described as being merciful and full of loving-kindness. It involves redemption from enemies, preservation from death, atonement for sin, and covenant faithfulness. None of these things are ascribed to the wicked in other Psalms, but they are applied to the elect many times. The wicked cannot be recipients of this 'chesed' or they would be saved, and by definition- not reprobated.

H7356 Hebrew: רַחֲמִים *rachamim* = *compassion* cognate noun is *rechem* = womb.

The word speaks of natural care and compassion, not of grace and covenantal loving-kindness in any way. This caring attitude results in the provision of a sustainable environment for mankind.

Lk 6:35

But love your enemies, do good and lend hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For he is kind to the unthankful and evil.

There really is no problem here at all. The point that Jesus is making is that there is no credit to love or do good to those who love you or do good to you (v32-33). Our motive to do good to all people, including evil people, is that God has acted likewise. If we do good to bad people, we will be acting like him and be seen to be of him.

Some argue, therefore, that God must love everyone, including the reprobate. But why does this follow? [Note that Luke is careful to say that God is *kind* to the unthankful, not that he loves them.]

Firstly, scripture is full of references to God hating sinners, therefore this argument would strip them of any sensible meaning. If these texts mean what they say, then God cannot love the reprobate; hence this argument cannot be right. In what way did God love Esau? This verse cannot be set in contradiction to many other passages.

Secondly, all that God does is perfect and complete, without complication. If God loves someone, he loves them to the end. God's love, therefore, saves. If the reprobate are not saved, then God cannot love them, or else he would have failed to love properly. Those upon whom God sets his love, he protects and redeems. (see footnote 3 prev. page re: *chesed*.) This sense of protection is contained within the meaning of the word love.

God has loved those that, at one time, were bad and against him - the elect. God's reaction to a world of men in rebellion to him was not to destroy that world, a just and righteous act by the way, but he expressed love to that world by redeeming a portion of the human race, by his own power and at great cost, in order to populate a new world with people that love and obey him. If we love others, then we are following our Father who expressed love to a fallen world.

Regarding the last part of the verse and verse 36: '*He is kind to the unthankful and evil. Therefore be compassionate (merciful), just as you Father also is compassionate.*' We should note the following: Jesus is moving on to explaining that God even continues to be kind to fallen men now, he is so patient with this fallen world. 'Kind' is *chrestos*, meaning good, kind easy and its base meaning is *something appropriate or superior for a particular use*. For example, Jesus' yoke is *chrestos* (easy). This cannot be stretched to mean loving or gracious. Again it refers to God's

provision for those who hate him.⁴

Matt 5:43-48

The argument is suggested that: if we are patterned to be like God, and if we are to love our enemies, then God must love everybody. *How can God command us to love those that he hates? Is the scope of our love greater than God's?*

We must take great care in trying to read back the character of God from his commands to us. It is much wiser to learn about God's attributes from clear statements about them elsewhere. For instance, who will be bold enough to say that God longs for Satan's rehabilitation or that Jesus intercedes for him on the basis that we must pray for those who persecute us? *In fact we know* that Jesus does not pray for reprobates (Jn 17:9).

Such an interpretation from Matt. 5 would be false and in conflict with other scriptures. The rule for the creature does not equally apply to the creator. He is wholly above our order. The parallel passage in Luke 6 27-36 adds the action of lending money, a notion totally unsuited of application to God.

Again, the argument is that God preserves his creation, even though it is spoiled by sin. God is good to all. Man's hate to God and nature's bondage does not stop a good God from providing for creation's welfare. Since we have a God like this, we also must be good to others to the extent of our capabilities. Our capabilities are limited to good reactions to evil actions upon us. The reaction of a godly person to evil is to repay it with good (Rm 12:17-21). This is how we show love to enemies. Those we thus love are not loved by God, he will repay vengeance upon those who mistreat us (Rm 12:19-20).

1 Pt 3:20

God's patience waited in the days of Noah.

We need spend little time with this. The obvious interpretation of this verse is that the patience of God was exercised towards the benefit of only eight people, Noah

⁴Lexical Details pertaining to Luke 6:35 (Strong / Friberg)

Compassionate 3629 Greek: οἰκτιρῶν οἰκτιρῶν {oyk-tir'-mone} • from 3627; TDNT - 5:159,680; adj • *merciful, of tender mercy 1.*

οἰκτιρῶνες adj nom masc pl , from οἰκτιρῶν-ον *compassionate, merciful.*

Kind

5543 Greek: χρηστός chrestos {khrase-tos'} • from 5530; TDNT - 9:483,1320; adj • AV - *kind 2, easy 1, better 1, goodness 1, good 1, gracious 1; 7 • 1) fit, fit for use, useful 1a) virtuous, good 2) manageable 2a) mild, pleasant (as opp. to harsh, hard sharp, bitter) 2b) of things: more pleasant, of people, kind, benevolent*

χρηστός adj nom masc sing , from χρηστός, ή, όν w. a basic mng. of being well adapted to fulfil a purpose *useful, suitable, excellent;* (1) of things *good, easy, pleasant;* of requirements *easy* (Matt 11.30); *superior, better* (Luke 5.39)

and his family. He waited patiently for them to build the ark according to his instructions. There is also a sense in which God's patience, as tolerance of sin, was towards the wicked remainder of the world's population; but this lends no support to a supposed goodness in God toward them. God's patience in goodness was extended to Noah's family. God's tolerance to sinners was a temporary respite before he poured out his wrath upon them.

We should note that the New Testament frequently alludes to the days of Noah being a type for the end of this present world. God's dealings with the wicked are exactly the same now; there is no grace or mercy being extended to the reprobate.

Luke 19:41/Matt 23:37

Again, this need not trouble us long. Defenders of a love of God to the wicked make much of these passages which contain no clear statement on the matter, such is the desperation to find any thread of support.

Luke 19:41 mentions Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. In what way does this help the case - none at all. Jesus also prophesies about its future, lamenting its failure to identify the Messiah. Jerusalem contained two sorts of people, those who trusted in the Messiah (elect) and those who did not. Some of those who failed to recognise Jesus as the Christ, later did so as we learn in Acts. If this text shows a disposition of goodness in God to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, it is equally applicable solely to the elect, as much as solely or jointly to the wicked or all people.

Israel was appointed originally to be a light to the Gentiles with the word of God and failed utterly in the task. Instead she prided herself on her privileged status as God's own, Rabbis called the Gentiles 'dogs'. All this was in God's plan which included a rejection of Israel as the means of testifying to the whole world, the church being appointed to this task. This is declared in both the Old and New Testaments.⁵ Though decreed by God, Jesus laments this failure in the same way that God mourns Israel's behaviour in the Psalms and prophetic books.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!

Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. Matt 23:37-8

⁵ As God's people, Israel was to be God's priesthood, as part of a missionary work to the rest of the nations (Isa 42:6,45:4-6; Zech 8:23; Ex 19:5). Israel failed, not only in this venture but also in her own faithfulness to the covenant (Rm 11:21). Jesus came as the obedient servant who fulfilled the will of God and attributed the work of missionary to the world to himself and his people. He even lifts passages in Isaiah relating to the future glory of Zion (like 61:1-4, 42:1-6) and consciously fulfils them in himself (Mt 12:17-21; Lk 4:16-21).

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Matt 23:37 is the parallel passage to Lk 19:41. Jesus' lament is slightly amplified here. Again a strong case can be made that he is referring to the elect that he wished to gather. It is a reference to Israel's failure which is too vague to draw out notions about God's attributes. If we insist that Jesus is here referring to reprobates, then we have a God who is sad, and longing for fellowship with a wayward creation, desperately holding out his arms in loving welcome and being completely frustrated by sinners who reject his offer. Neither does this make sense in a chapter about condemnation of religious leaders. Can Jesus really be holding out loving arms to those whom he condemned to hell a few verses earlier (v33)?

'Your children' refers to the elect of Jerusalem who were spurned by unbelieving Jews and even murdered. This is the clear implication from the immediate context (v30,31, 34, 35). The elect community could not be gathered as a testimony to the wider community because they were persecuted. Jesus grieves over this and declares that judgment is upon Jerusalem as a result (v38). Just as the historical testimony of prophets (God's children) was rejected violently, the culmination of the sin of Jerusalem's religious leaders was to be the rejection and crucifixion of the last in the line of God's testimony - Jesus, God's own son.

The Optative⁶ Passages

One matter to be borne in mind in considering these verses is the unusual character of Israel. The Jews had been chosen, elected, as the people of God from amongst many nations, as such, they were an example and type of the election of God's people from the world. Israel, in general, demonstrates God's selection of some not others. In terms of the world's ancient nations, Israel is favoured with an especial relationship to God (Rm 11:1,2,5).

Within Israel, however, there is a further selection. Not all within Israel are truly Israelites (elect; Rm 9:6-7), there is a further process of discrimination in order to be an object lesson for the church (Rm 11:5,7). Within God's decree, there is a call to Israel as a nation, and there is an effectual call to a remnant; but God called the whole nation "his son" because of this special relationship amongst the nations (Hos 11:1).

In order for God to justly remonstrate with his people as a nation, there are many passages where God speaks to Israel in very paternal terms and often with great longing. If God had not warned, in this and many other ways, he would have been

⁶ **Optative.** For those readers not conversant with the niceties of Greek grammar, the word "optative" means "something that is expressive of a wish or desire". Hence these following texts are those in which it appears as if God is expressing a desire or wish for the salvation of more than the elect.

unjust; and so we have passages like the following where God is said to long for an obedient people who, themselves, tend to be wayward. In some passages it is difficult to assess whether God is addressing Israel in general terms as an elect nation, Israel as elect but wayward needing to repent, or elect/reprobates from within Israel. It is not good enough for expositors to happily draw promises from Israel's experience as a rule, but suddenly declare that certain passages are actually addressing the reprobate or all men. Each passage has to be examined within context. We will look at three.

Deut 5:29

O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!

It is the covenant people who are addressed here (5:1). Moses is reminding them of their commitment to God upon hearing the 10 Commandments. In this verse God simply states that this attitude of humble commitment would bear good fruit for them if they continued.

God is speaking of a covenant people who had submitted to his law and committed themselves to his ways, stating that such an obedient heart would bode well with them. Is this not true? An obedient, covenant people will do well. How can this be applied to the lost?

Isa 48:18

O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea:

This is addressed to the house of Jacob, the elect line. God says that he will defer his anger to those addressed (v9) and that these people may not be 'cut off', but rather, refined (v10). The Lord speaks of these people, who swear by his name (v1), in terms of love (v14), calling (v15), redemption (v17, 20), leading and teaching them (v17), and then a longing for their obedience (v18). Though rebuked for failing, these people are elect, not reprobate.

Ps 81:13

Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways!

The context of the whole Psalm shows that this text is very similar, being a warning to the wayward but elect. In fact, they are contrasted with those who hate the Lord.

To be continued (DV).....