

God is Just and Merciful

Exodus 34:5-7, Romans 2:3-11

Brothers and sisters, I have a little musical trivia for you this morning. Do you know which song this is?? (play riff) If you guessed “Personal Jesus” you are correct.

When this song first came out in 1989 the lyrics presented a bit of a confusing scenario for Christians. Was this song trying to sneak some evangelism into the mainstream music scene? It kind of sounded like it because in evangelism we were always talking about a “*personal*” relationship with Jesus... and the song lyrics mention that he hears your prayers and he cares, and that he is a forgiver, and there’s that punch-line in the song too - reach out and touch faith!

But there’s also that line about “*pick up the receiver, I’ll make you a believer*” and on the heels of all the Televangelist scandals that were exposed in the 80’s, and how those ministries were characterized by soliciting their viewers to pick up the phone, call in, and make a donation - you couldn’t help

but wonder if this was a sarcastic reference to that. Perhaps the whole song was really a cynical critique of the Televangelist business and how they sold you a “personalized” Jesus that catered to your every need and want, and all you had to do was “put your hand on the TV screen – reach out and touch faith!”

Personally... I’m more inclined to see this song as a satirical critique on self-interested faith than any sort of endorsement for becoming a follower of Jesus. Now I don’t know if this was what the song writers had in mind when they wrote these lyrics – but as the saying goes “*if the shoe fits -wear it.*”

Because the truth is there are lots of people who are interested in having their own personal Jesus, someone who cares, hears our prayers. Someone who always makes us feel good about ourselves, who functions as our own personal Magic Eraser. “*Oops I did something bad – phew, thank goodness I’ve got my personal Jesus with me, let’s take care of that mistake and just apply His forgiveness to it... say a prayer,*

I know he cares, he's a forgiver, he'll deliver - and would you look at that, its gone!"

And the nice thing about a personal Jesus is that you only bring Him out when you want to. He's not the kind of Jesus who will interfere in what you are doing, or poke His nose into your business, or get angry at you. He's just there when you need to utilize Him, good old reliable personal Jesus.

And it appears this view of Jesus has also been extended and expanded to shape our current view of God. In 2005 sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton published their research into the spiritual lives of teenagers and summarized their key findings in five points, which still characterize what people generally believe today.

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. god wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

4. god does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when god is needed to resolve a problem.

5. good people go to heaven when they die.

Now, I pray that with what we've learned about God and His attributes - over the past few months – you are able to see this isn't quite correct. It sounds good... but its not the whole picture is it. It's almost biblical – but not quite.

And that's because when the people who believe this were taught about the bible, the difficult, uncomfortable, challenging, or disturbing sections about who God is - were skipped over, left out or ignored. Let me demonstrate. Could you tell me what John 3:16 says? Probably right *"God so loved the world that He gave his only son"* and maybe some of you can continue on to vs. 17 where it says *"God did not send His son to condemn the world but to save the world."* But who remembers John 3:18b *"but whoever does not believe, stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

Or what about our first scripture reading this morning? We've probably heard it before, vs.6-7 *"Yahweh, the gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin..."* but how often do we hear the rest? *"Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."*

I'll confess that last Sunday was probably the first time that I've included that part of the passage in a sermon – because as a pastor I'm particularly aware that we've so neglected speaking and teaching about things like God punishing sin that to read such a scripture verse in a service without explanation or context is liable to cause unhelpful confusion for people and perhaps even put their faith in crisis.

So – as we have been learning about God and who He is, we now have the opportunity – and I have the responsibility - to teach you ALL about God – not just the things that we might like to learn about Him or that which is comfortable for us.

And as we are preparing to celebrate Good Friday and Easter this coming week, there is no better time or context for us to focus on this. So, let's just get down to it this morning – as I said last week, this Sunday we are looking at God's Justice... and that means looking at God's anger and His wrath as well.

Now what often happens when we look at this - is that regardless of everything else we've learned about God's being and character – and there is quite a bit of it mentioned in the Exodus 34 passage... God's name "Yahweh" – I am who I am which refers to His self-existence. Then there is His grace and compassion which refers to His Goodness and Love. And the references to His longsuffering, His covenant faithfulness and truly keeping that faithfulness all refer to His Immutability, His unchanging nature.

And His ability to forgive sin, wickedness and rebellion speaks to His Sovereignty, that He has the right decide to do this, and as we learned last week His ability to keep His own law, His own word that He will offer such forgiveness, this is an

expression of His Righteousness, His own obedience to Himself.

And this whole passage comes about because Moses wants to see God, and God has to tell Moses, no one can see my essence and live, so we have reference to God's perfection in His Holiness and that distinction between Creator and creature.

But... what usually happens is that in spite of ALL these amazing attributes of who God is, the minute we hear that He punishes sins and especially with how it is phrased that He punishes it to the third and fourth generation... EVERYTHING else He's revealed to us about himself just goes out the window and we characterize God as a capricious tyrant who is just waiting for an opportunity to smite us and who lives to punish us. Do you know what I'm talking about?

But brothers and sisters, not only is that a grievous mischaracterization of God, it shows that we really haven't fully grasped what God has already showed us about Himself.

Its not a matter of finding out something negative about God that undoes all the positive, its realizing that the very being and nature and character of God naturally extends to include anger and wrath against sin and evil, and if it didn't – everything else that He's revealed to us about Himself would be suspect.

And it is also being deliberate in applying all that God has revealed to us about Himself so that we distinguish and separate (make Holy) God's anger and wrath from ours and our experiences with sinful anger and wrath. As James 1:20 states *"man's anger does not bring about the righteousness that God desires..."* and so by implication God's Holy anger that is set apart from human anger and characterized by His goodness, His truth, His perfection, by His all-knowing and all the rest of who He is... it can bring about the righteousness that God desires.

So truly understanding who God is reveals the necessity of His holy anger and His holy wrath against that which violates His Holiness, His righteousness and His justice. A god who cannot

or will not maintain the essence of who He is, over and against every violation of His Law and His Righteousness, cannot actually be God.

Ok – all of this so far is to help us understand the importance and necessity of what we are learning about God this morning, and now that we can see this – let’s look at God’s justice.

Now the concept of Justice has gotten a lot of media attention in the past few years, as a result we’ve all become familiar with the term “*social justice*” and from there we may have come across “*climate justice, indigenous justice, racial justice, and economic justice.*” And last month in the TALK Show we referred to the “*justice system*” and “*restorative justice.*”

And we each have our own concept of justice as well, we all have an ideal that is most important to us by which we determine if things are actually just. Some people determine justice based on the ideal of freedom, we’ve seen examples recently where people have been protesting the “injustice” of gov’t policies that infringe upon freedoms. And those who

disagree with this protest are likely to determine what is just based on the ideal of fairness and equality.

Others take a more pragmatic approach and say that justice has been done if people are happy, while a large segment of people who advocate for social justice base their pursuit of justice on the ideal of redistributing power.

But justice isn’t really this confusing or convoluted, it is really just about someone rewarding those who are obedient to the law and punishing those who violate it, that’s it. Those who would argue that its more complicated than that are just trying to game the system to favor themselves or their beliefs.

And this understanding of justice comes from who God is - as God. When 1 Peter 2:14 says that rulers are sent by God “*to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.*” It is establishing a principle of justice for human authorities that is based on God’s sovereign rule and His ultimate responsibility as God for punishing those who do

wrong and rewarding those who do right. That's God's Justice.

This is also what we read in our scripture passage from Rom 2 as well; vs. 6-8 *"God "will repay each person according to what they have done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."* This is Justice.

Now, if you really feel the need to add some adjectives in front of God's justice, when God rewards people we call it *"remunerative justice"* and when God punishes people, we call it *"retributive justice."*

And when God rewards us for obedience and blesses us, its important to note that its not because we have earned it through any perfect obedience – but because God has promised it to us out of His goodness and He is pleased to keep His promises. If that needs to be made clearer and we are still tempted to think that we can put God in our debt

through being good and obedient to His Law – remember, you didn't earn the Law – God gave it to us. Like the Apostle Paul says in 1 Cor 4:7 *"what do you have... that was not **given** to you!?"* The same holds true for our faith in Christ right?! Ephesians 2:8 *"it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God."*

Now let's look at what is involved when God's anger and wrath punish sin. The first and most important aspect that we need to grasp, is that God punishes sin to make His Holiness and Justice whole again. Not that we could really ever take anything away from God, but I think this is the most helpful way I can explain it.

We really need to comprehend that what is most sinful about sin and most evil about evil is how it contradicts, it offends, it violates God Himself – and that has to be answered. And God being God, all-knowing, self-existing as the basis for everything that exists is aware of every single violation of Himself that is committed, and like I said, we can't really take anything away from God – but I'm not sure how to better

explain this than by saying that its like Sin and our sins disrupt something that has to be fixed for God, or they take away something that has to be made whole, or that it incurs a debt with God that has to be repaid.

So, forgive my inadequate analogies here – I’m praying the Holy Spirit will impress upon you the rightness of God punishing sin for the sole reason of restoring how it violates His Justice and Righteousness, its all about Him. He is the source of all Justice and Righteousness and when He punishes sin it is about restoring His glory and bringing Himself more glory for dealing out that punishment. First and foremost, it’s all about God – and if that rubs us the wrong way... well that’s where the Holy Spirit needs to do some work to change us.

And when the Holy Spirit convicts us to see this, we will echo King David’s confession in Psalm 51:4 *“against **you and you only** have I sinned.”* Now its quite obvious that David had sinned against Bathsheba by taking her for his pleasure, that he sinned against her husband Uriah by committing adultery and then taking Uriah’s life to cover up a pregnancy, that he

had sinned against his position as King by misusing his powers and influence... but ultimately - these are all just side-effects of God’s Holiness and Righteousness being violated, and David acknowledges this by stating it is only against **God** that He has sinned.

Brothers and sisters, if you come away from today’s message with only one thing – I pray that its this conviction about how necessary and good it is that God punishes sin in order to restore His justice and righteousness. It’s all about Him – and if the Holy Spirit brings us to that admission, that is a major major major growth point in our Christian lives, Amen?!

Ok, the next thing we need to know about God’s wrath punishing sin is really whether or not God is actually punishing us personally in our own lives - isn’t it?! I know this because as a minister, one of the most frequent statements and/or questions I hear from people is *“I feel like God is mad at me, or Is God punishing me for something, is God angry with me??”* especially when they are going through difficult or tragic circumstances in life.

So, let me just say brothers and sisters – in all of God’s perfections that we’ve learned about as revealed in scripture – does it ever say that God is passive aggressive? Is there ever a situation in the scripture where someone is like “*Hello God, how are you?*” and God is like “*I’m Fine!*” and the person is like “*You’re fine? Because it doesn’t sound like you’re fine...*” Of course not.

God is a God who speaks, He communicates, the very creation He makes through speaking it into existence continues to echo His Word and communicates to us about Him. If God is angry with you – He will tell you and you will know that you know it, you won’t be guessing about it.

And its not hard to know what God is communicating to us brothers and sisters, He has given us the Holy Scriptures, the Holy Bible – what God is saying to us? is right there for us to read. So, is God angry with us? Well brothers and sisters - what does He tell us in the scriptures?

Romans 1:18 says “*The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness **of people**, who suppress the truth by their wickedness...*” and over in Psalm 14:2-3 God says “*The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind, to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.*”

So, the truth is brothers and sisters that in a very broad, high-level sense – scripture tells us that God is angry with all of us humans and His wrath is against the human race because of our sin.

And yes, God’s punishment of sin involves the difficulties and tragedies that we experience in life as well. In Genesis 3 God is very clear with Adam and Eve that the consequences of their sin will involve conflict in marriage relationships, pain in child-bearing, thorns and thistles in farming, toil in working, and eventually death. And in the book of Revelation the Apostle John sees visions of catastrophic events like earthquakes, hailstorms, famine, plague and wars and it is revealed to him

that these are representing God's holy judgements upon sinful and rebellious mankind.

But, before you despair and fall into a crisis of faith thinking God has it out for you – please understand this is the big picture, this is God's Holy anger in big broad strokes and a sort of indirect punishment on our sin through the consequences of sin warping and twisting His good creation.

AND... when people ask me if God is angry with them, or punishing them they usually are not asking about this big broad scriptural understanding – but it is important to explain it because otherwise I can't address their underlying question correctly, which is *“why am I suffering this trial, this particular tragedy?”* And at this point I have to ask them a question *“are you IN Jesus Christ?”* because their answer to it determines why they are experiencing their particular circumstances.

If they are not IN Christ, then it may very well be God's wrath is consequentially punishing them for their sins, and that is

usually pretty obvious – because the punishment fits the crime so to speak. Someone cheats on their wife and as a result their marriage and family is falling apart. Someone drives drunk and causes a fatality and they are being charged with murder. Someone lies continually to friends and family and nobody trusts them.

Or it could be they are just experiencing the broader indirect consequences of sin in this world. Sickness and disease, politicians abusing power, someone steals from you, or a natural disaster destroys your home.

But God's wrath in punishing sin in consequential ways is no reason for anyone to despair and harden their hearts against God, however difficult or tragic as their circumstances may be.

On this side of our Lord's return such wrath always brings the opportunity for people to cry out to the Lord and ask for His mercy. As the Lord says in Ezekiel 18:23 *“Do I take pleasure in the death of the wicked? Declares the Sovereign Lord. Am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?”*

So, in addition to punishing Sin to rectify His Holiness, God's wrath has the added benefit of being the means by which sinners can be brought to repentance to receive God's mercy.

So, if the person asking if God is angry at them has already repented and has received God's mercy in Jesus Christ, then my answer to their question is Romans 8:1 *"There is no condemnation for those who are IN Christ Jesus."* Instead, we are to understand, believe, and change our perspective and trust that whatever consequential trials we experience as a result of our sins or living in a sinful world are no longer God's wrath and punishment on us - but His Holy refinement of us.

Hebrews 12:7-8 tells us *"Endure hardship as discipline; God is [confirming] you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all."*

And that may seem like a small comfort brothers and sisters IF we are not aware that God's wrath against sin is not limited to

just consequential punishment. God can also punish people by giving them over to their sin in this lifetime. Paul says as much in Romans 1:28 since *"they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done."*

And when our Lord returns, there will be the great and final judgment, which was referred to in our reading from Romans 2:5 today as *"the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed."* And there will be a separation of those who are IN Christ and those who are not. And as Jesus teaches in His parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25:46 those who are not recipients of God's Mercy in Jesus on that day of wrath *"will go away to eternal punishment."*

So, does it still seem like a small comfort to have your legitimacy as a true child of God in Jesus Christ confirmed by the consequential hardship we must endure, and which God uses to refine us and make us fit for His eternal presence?

No, it is a great comfort to us. As Hebrews 12:10-11 concludes *“God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of peace and righteousness for those who have been trained by it.”* Amen?!

Well brothers and sisters, there you have it. That’s God’s Justice and how it includes His anger and wrath and punishment of sin. Now you have the full and complete scriptural revelation of who God is and I pray that the Holy Spirit uses it this morning so that you will either ask God for his Mercy or thank Him for His Mercy and put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your savior. Amen!?

But I have to apologize to you because I did not get around to explaining the apparent cliff-hanger contradiction from Exodus 34:7 that I ended last week’s sermon with. How is it possible that God can forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin – and yet say *“He does not leave the guilty unpunished”*??

If God’s mercy spares us from His abandoning wrath and His eternal wrath that we would rightly deserve – what happens to it? How does God fix all our violations of His Holiness if He extends His mercy to us instead of the punishment that would rectify it?

Well brothers and sisters, be here on Good Friday at 5pm this week and will bear witness to how God accomplished this Justice - through Jesus - on the cross. Amen?!

Alright - Let’s pray.