

## **WHERE JUSTICE AND MERCY MEET**

Exodus 34:6-7

Intro of myself/sermon series.

I'll never forget the day. It was one of my first days on campus as a freshman at the University of British Columbia. It was a typically gorgeous Vancouver day. One of those stunning northwest September days that seem to be a demonstration of God's mercy towards us before the fall and winter set in.

I was walking across campus, sort of getting a feel for this place where I was going to spend the next few years, and I stumbled upon this beautiful building in the middle of campus, and the sign said Regent College. Now the University of British Columbia is this massive institution, 40,000 undergraduate students, 10,000 grad students, 15,000 faculty and staff, but right in the heart of this monument to secularism is Regent College, one of the most respected theological seminaries in Canada. So on this beautiful, non-rainy, late summer, God laughing at us north westerners day, I decided to go in. And me being, well... me, I ended up browsing around the bookstore.

And as I was browsing, a particular book caught my eye on the shelf - It was called *The Knowledge of the Holy* by A.W. Tozer. Well, I had no where to be, so I opened the book and began reading. And the first line of the first chapter I read this phrase that absolutely gripped me for the next several years of my life. And it was this: "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

You see, how you think about God impacts everything about your life. Your thoughts about God permeate and affect everything from the hugest questions: Who am I? What am I here for? ....to how you order our coffee at Starbucks....Or whether you order coffee at Starbucks at all...

And unfortunately it's our tendency to devolve into unhealthy or even distorted ways of thinking about God and his character. And that's not surprising. We live in a culture that talks about God all the time, and that affects us. Especially in American media and politics the word god get thrown around all the time and there is an assumption that everyone is talking about the same thing. Even among Christians people can mean all kinds of different things when they talk about God, and so we need to be disciplined and intentional in our thinking that we know what other mean and what we mean when we talk about God.

So your thinking about God is crucial, and those thoughts especially affect how you relate to him. Relating rightly to God depends on having a right understand of his identity and character. The reason we often relate to God in ways that are untrue is because we see him wrongly, we see his character wrong.

And you totally get this on a human level. Have you ever had conflict with someone and you know you need to have a conversation with them, and you've played out that conversation in your head? It's sort of this theater of the mind — you play out what you're going to say and you play their role, you know, guessing at what they're going to say, you imagine both sides of the conversation, and you do that based on your understanding of who they are, their character.

But then what happens most of the time is when you actually have the conversation it turns out completely different. Instead of the huge blowup you expected, the person apologizes, and suddenly all those witty verbal jabs you prepared are completely useless. Well - your assumptions about that person's character and how they would handle the situation were wrong.

So you need to get that the same thing is true of your relationship with God. If you don't understand his identity and character in the right way, you'll relate to him in the wrong way.

Well, this passage we read this morning in Exodus 34, is the longest, the richest, the most dense description of God's identity and character, certainly in Exodus, but maybe in the entire Bible.

Let's read it again together:

*The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed:*

*"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love to thousands,*

*forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,*

*but who will by no means clear the guilty,*

*visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation."*

Now you were loving verse 6 right? God's mercy and grace, his love and faithfulness, And the we got to verse 7 and we heard guilty, visiting iniquity, children and you were like, what/huh? I mean, admit it, that's what most of you were thinking. The movie started good, but bad ending. So what is going on here?

Well at the the core of what is happening are these two central character traits of God. One the one hand we have verse 6, and some of verse 7, that is just overflowing in its language about God... He's merciful and gracious, he abounds in love and faithfulness, shows steadfast love to thousands. And then you get into verse 7 and you see this aspect of God's character that we can call God's justice, and you might call it judgment or wrath, but it involves God's punishment of sin.

And if we're honest, God's love and his justice are two aspects of God's character that really baffle most of us. Maybe we affirm both, but we have a hard time understanding how they can work together. Some of you might tend to sort of see God as either one or the other, or maybe you sort of see one of them eclipsing the other. Or maybe most of you are just confused about the whole thing. But how we see the interaction of these two character traits in God has a huge affect on our relationship with him. So how figure this out? How do we go about seeing how v. 6 and v. 7 can come together?

Well, what's interesting, and where we need to start, is that when God reveals his character to us, when he shows us in his word what he is like, he doesn't do it in the way that would be nice and crisp and clean for us. You know when I picked up Tozer's book that day, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, it was so nice because each chapter was just about one of God's attributes. So Tozer led with a chapter on God's self-existence, followed by his self-sufficiency, his omnipresence, his omniscience, and you had this nice packaged description of God. But the Bible doesn't do that. This systematic method is not the way God has chosen to show himself to us. Instead, the primary way the Bible reveals Gods character to us is through story and through poetry. *Repeat anything?*

Now you might look at verses 6-7 and think, "well right here was have a clear list of attributes," and you'd be right, but look where it occurs - right in the middle of one of the most important stories in the entire Old Testament. And so the truth is that you can't grasp the significance of verses 6-7 without understanding the significance of the story it's in.

Why don't you turn back to Ex. 32 and just follow along. I'm going to just briefly summarize the story we're still in up to this point, because it's crucial that we understand what's been happening to get to where we are today.

Now we know that God, in his mercy and grace, rescued his people out of bondage in Egypt, and he led them through the Red Sea and across the wilderness to the foot of this mountain, Mt. Sinai. And at Mt. Sinai God appears to Israel personally in the form of a cloud and thunderstorm on top of the mountain. And God reveals himself to them. And he says to them,

I'm the Lord, I'm Yahweh, I rescued you out of Egypt, I love you, I'm committed to you, and he shows it in a covenant with them, in the 10 commandments - and there the first thing he says, the first request he makes of them, is he says, don't go after other gods, and don't try to represent me with some other image the way the other nations worship their gods.

That's the first things God says. And what's the first thing the people do? 40 days go by after the 10 commandments, and Moses is on the mountain with the Lord, in the cloud, the people in the valley can see the cloud on top of the mountain, and what do they do? They do exactly what God asked them not to do. They melt down their jewelry and they make an idol to worship. And then they enact this religious festival around it. And the story says that they ate, and drank, and then "they rose up to play." And the text is being modest. Really it's a polite way to say that they engaged in sexual revelry.

So the Israelites make a calf, they get drunk, and then they have sex. Kind of a strange way to worship Yahweh. Where would they get this idea that they should worship God this way? Well, where have they been living for the past 400 years? They haven't been worshipping the Lord. I mean, he's revealing himself to them because they don't really know about him anymore. Most of these people brought their idols out of Egypt with them. And so in their first attempt at worshipping the true God, they worship him in the same way you'd go about worship and Egyptian god. And so God is understandably upset. The first thing he asked them not to do, they do.

So God ends up inviting Moses to intercede on behalf of the people. And God's plan is to wipe them all out and start over again with Moses. But Moses says, no God, that's a terrible plan. I mean you are the LORD, you're merciful and gracious, and what about your name and your covenant... And God responds by relenting. And while he doesn't fully forgive Israel, neither does he sever his covenant commitment that he made to them.

But in the end 3000 Israelites are killed because of it, and there is a plague, and God tells Moses that his presence won't be with them anymore. And you remember from last week, the people were devastated. And Moses was incredibly overwhelmed, and so he comes to God and he prays, "God show me your ways. I want to know you, I want to understand you, I want to understand your ways. You are a God of love but also a god of justice. And so God meets him powerfully, and that's the context in which we read verses 6-7.

And so these two verses aren't just a list of random attributes of God, just trying to somehow describe who God is. God is summarizing for Moses how he just acted in the story. He is showing Moses what kind of God would do what just happened.

So let's look more closely at God's words in these verses. And we're just simply going to see what this tells us about God's love, about his justice, and then we'll conclude by trying to see where these two attributes meet.

## 1. Love

God begins by simply proclaiming his name. Yahweh, Yahweh - do you remember what that meant? I Am what I am. It's God's statement of existence. He exists unbound from any necessary hold on who he is. But look at what follows. God is not just a distant God, the ultimate truth about God is not his transcendence. He isn't the unmoved mover of Greek philosophy. No, he is merciful and gracious. He's concerned for the welling of his people and he's hurt by their action, but he acts in grace. He gives to his people what they don't deserve.

He's slow to anger, which doesn't mean that he doesn't get angry, but that he can hold his anger. And this isn't the first time in Exodus God's had cause to get angry with his people. Think about their grumbling over manna, their whining for water. God's been angry for a while now, yet he hasn't broken his loving covenant with his people. He's abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

The heart of what we learn about God's love comes at the beginning of verse 7. God keeps his steadfast love for thousands. We've talked before about the hebrew word used here for steadfast love. It's the word *Hesed*. The whole concept is difficult to translate. English has to be one of the worst languages for talking about love. There is no nuance of meaning. In the same sentence I can say; I love Thai food, I love LeBron James and I love my wife, but if it all means the same thing I'm in big trouble. In American english love simply means to feel something strongly.

But *Hesed* is all about covenant, commitment, and action. It's action that goes after another person's wellbeing no matter how they respond, because there has been a promise made. *Hesed* is God's loyal, steadfast, covenant love. It has nothing to do with "like". There are some days my wife says to me, "Ben, I love you but I don't like you right now." God's steadfast love doesn't mean he's happy with what people do. He doesn't "like" sin. But he has bound himself in covenant with people he knows are flawed and selfish.

But because of his covenant God walks the distance with his people. God knew what he was getting into. How many times in these few chapters has God called Israel "a stiff-necked people"? But he continues to be faithful to them. God's covenant faithfulness is at the heart of his love.

And he keeps that steadfast love to thousands. The meaning here is actually to a thousand generations. How long is a thousand generations? 40 yrs a generation, 40,000 years, it's a long time right? And that's what it means. It means forever. God's *hesed* is his permanent commitment to his covenant people.

So God has signed up for this permanent covenant with a sinful people. How does he maintain that covenant? There was a couple celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary asked, "How did you stay married for 60 years?" "One day at a time," the husband answered. How does God keep his covenant commitment? By forgiving. "Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."

The Hebrew word here for forgive is the word *naSA*, and it simply means to pick up or to carry. It's actually the most basic Hebrew word for picking something up. And this most basic expression says something profound about how God maintains his covenant love.

You see, sometimes we think about sin, actually often about our own sin, as simply this vapor that just sort of goes out there into the air and disappears. And what I mean by that is that we don't think our sin has substance, we don't think about it having effects. But the Bible talks about sin much differently. The Bible sees sin as something that isn't just a mist, a vapor, but something real and substantial.

Imagine taking a huge boulder and heaving it out into the middle of a pond. It would create a significant amount of ripples, even waves, and those ripples would extend out and bounce off the lily pads and the shore line and anything else in the pond. And that's kind of like our sin. We sin within the human pond and so our sin bounces off of other people and affects them. Sin is a boulder, it's a weight.

And what God is saying when he offers forgiveness is that if we recognize the weight of our sin, he is willing to pick it up. He will carry our sin. He will take this weight and all its effects upon himself. And this is the Old Testament so I'm not supposed to get to Jesus until the end, right? But I have to get to him right here, because this is what he did on the cross. He picked up our sin, he took upon himself all the ripples, all the waves that the weight of our sin created, he bears it all in order to forgive us.

And there are some of you who are Christians here this morning that for you the idea of God's wrath much easier to believe than his love. And you look at your past and all the junk that's there, all the enormous boulders that have gone into the pond, and all the ripples and waves that you're still feeling, and you don't really know if you can take God at his word here. And you rehash what you've done over and over in your mind, and when things go wrong in

your life you think its because God is punishing you for the things in your past. But if you are a Christian that dishonors what God says here. And this morning it might be a huge step of faith for you just to believe you are forgiven.

Well, up to this point this all sounds good right? God's love, his forgiveness... But we have to deal with God's justice.

## 2. Justice.

Look at the next phrase, "who will by no means clear the guilty." God's justice is his settled stance against sin. He will not allow it. He is set against it, and will punish it wherever he finds it. So God isn't just sort of grandfather on his chair, reading his newspaper, watching all the little ones run amok. His stance against sin is firm and he will not clear those who perpetrate it.

Now, just before we deal with the challenge of God's justice, can we just talk about the hope of God's justice for a moment? I don't know how we could function if we there were no hope that future wrongs would be accounted for and made right. If we don't believe in a God who will not clear the guilty there is not hope for the world.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian originally from the former Yugoslavia. In his earlier years as a Christian he was resistant to the idea of God's wrath. He saw it as unworthy of God and in conflict with his love. But after he saw the war in his own homeland, a conflict in which 200,000 people were killed and 3 million displaced, after he saw his own villages and cities destroyed and his own people shelled day in and day out, he couldn't imagine God not being angry. And as he thought of other atrocities his perspective began to change.

Here's Volf in his own words:

"Think of Rwanda in the last decade of the past century, where 800,000 people were hacked to death in one hundred days! How did God react to the carnage? Wasn't God fiercely angry with them? Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God's wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn't wrathful at the sight of the world's evil. God isn't wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love."

Brothers and sisters, as Christians, the fact that God does not clear the guilty is the greatest hope that evil will not win the day, but God will make everything right.

Now, we don't mind God enacting his judgment on others, those evil-doers out there. Where this becomes a personal challenge is when's God's justice is brought to bear on us. You see, the reality is everyone is guilty. For God to be truly just, we all should be punished.

We'll get to that, but we still have to deal with this difficult verse here right. What about this visiting iniquity on children and grandchildren and greatgrandchildren, and even great great greatgrandchildren?

Well let me tell you one misunderstanding, one wrong way to look at this, and that's this. You see, Grandpa Joe was a bad man. He was abusive, an adulterer, drank like a fish - just a downright bad guy. Then grandson Billy comes along, and he's not living or acting like that at all... but God going to visit on him the punishment for his grandpa's sin. So Billy gets in a car wreck as a teenager its because Gpa Joe was a sinner.

Wrong, and let me tell you why. Two other places in the OT talk about this same thing. Let me read them to you.

Deut. 24:16 - "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin."

- in the context of Israel's civil law, but the principle applies.

Ezekiel 18:20 - "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and he wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

Now, we don't have time to go into all of that, but can you trust me that Ex. 34:7 is saying something different than Grandson Billy being punished for Grandpa Joe's sin?

So what does this mean? Well, look at the parallel between the beginning of 7 and the end of 7. Do you remember how we said that thousands was referring to a thousand generations? The literal hebrew was thousands, but the inference was a thousand generations. The same structure is at work here. The literal hebrew is not to the third and fourth generations, but to the threes and the fours. The meaning is generations, but the literal words are to the threes and the fours. This use of the three and the fours is actually a Hebrew idiom. We see it other places in the Bible. Think of the book of proverbs. There are a couple of those places where it says, you know, three things are too wonderful for me, four I do not understand... Three things such and such, four things. You know what I'm talking about? Then in the book of Amos there is a similar phrase used. It's in Amos 1. The Lord says basically, "for three sins of Israel and



for four I will not revoke punishment. Basically what God is saying is - "whatever the sins of Israel, I will certainly hold them accountable."

What God is saying here is that his justice operates like this. He will deal with sin fully. However it needs to be dealt with and for however long until its dealt with, he will deal with it. . Let me say that again. This is the essence of God's justice. God will deal with sin however it needs to be dealt with, for however long it needs to be dealt with. Sin is counter to God in every conceivable way and it is his set disposition to punish and eradicate it. Whether it is systemic sin in the world or personal sin in you and me.

So where do these two meet? On the one hand God's covenantal, committed love, and on the other his determination to punish and eradicate sin? Let's go back to the story for a moment. You see, the heart of why we get verse 6-7 is the question of whether, in light of Israel's sin, God will continue to be present with his people. How can a perfectly righteous and holy God dwell in the midst of a sinful people without consuming them. This is the tension we see in the story.

You see, it seems that the only way for God to dwell with his people is for one of these attributes to sort of win out over the other. Either God can just go with his people, overlooking their sin and rebellion, ignoring justice, or he can leave his people alone, breaking his covenant commitment to them. And the tension is sort of left unresolved here in the text. God goes with his people, he renews his covenant with them, and the rest of the OT sort of continues to repeat this same cycle of sin, God punishing his people but never fully wiping them out, and then God renewing his covenant with them. And we're left with the question how can God dwell with his people, how can God be with us, how can he come and live in our midst, and remain both loving and just.

The answer to that question is what we celebrate at Christmas in the birth of a baby boy in a manger. In John 1:14, the apostle John says tells us that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." In Jesus, the holy God, who by no means clears the guilty, came to dwell with his people. His name was Emmanuel, God With Us. And John continues - "and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."

Do you remember Moses' request? He said of God - show me your glory God. And what did God do, it's really amazing to me. God didn't blind him with fire, or blast him with wind, he spoke to him. He declared to him in words who he is. Now John is saying, God has spoken again. He's shown his glory through the Word incarnate, the Word made flesh. So now when we ask of

God, God show me your glory, he points to one person - Jesus... full of what, full of grace and truth. Full of love and justice.

And Jesus was born in that stable for one purpose. John the Baptist called him the lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. He lived a perfect life. Exodus says in this story that Moses was a friend of God, but Jesus lived even closer to his Father, he wasn't just a friend he was a Son. And then he died death on the cross in our place. Bearing the full weight of the just punishment of God against our sin, against our rebellion, and rising victorious over sin and death. The answer to how a holy God can dwell with a sinful people is Jesus. The cross is the place where love and justice meet.

And if you remember the story, Moses came down from that mountain, and his face was glowing from beholding God's glory. He was transformed by it. But that shining face for Moses faded. The New Testament tells us that this is how we are transformed as Christians. As we behold God's glory in the face of Christ, we become like him.

No admixture wrath. All wrath has been spent. God's loving discipline vs. fear of punishment.

Jesus pleads God's justice, not merely God's love. Gives us certainty of forgiveness. God is not acting toward us out of his justice. Not choosing to act disregarding his justice, but in lie with it.

Communion