

**Clearly, God**  
***God of Love ... or God of Anger?***  
**August 14-15, 2010**

Good morning everyone.

We're in the second and final week of a very short series called "Clearly, God" trying to clear up a little bit of the confusion that surrounds the nature and character of God. Obviously, there's more confusion than there are weeks in this series, but the goal here is to try and nail down just *two fundamental issues* – two fundamental characteristics of who God is – which, if we can get these straight in our heads, will help us better understand how to relate to Him.

Last week we talked about the first characteristic and we used the story that has been called through the ages "The Prodigal Son" to illustrate that *God is a prodigal Father*. That sounds a little odd because we're accustomed to thinking about the word "prodigal" as describing waywardness and wantonness and irresponsibility. But that's not what it means at all. As we learned, the word "prodigal" means "to be recklessly extravagant; spending everything" ... which is how the father in Jesus' story acted in offering mercy and grace to his two sons – both the wild, irresponsible younger one *and* the outwardly-obedient-but-inwardly-defiant older one. (I encourage you, if you were not here, to watch or listen online or to pick up a DVD on the way out.)

Now, the reason Jesus told that story was to help us understand God; to say "this is what the Father in Heaven is like" so that we can better relate to Him.

And I think that's important because there are a lot of people – Christians, even – who acknowledge God, who appreciate God, who reverence God *but do not know how to approach Him at any given moment*. A lot of us hear the story of the loving and gracious prodigal father and say, "well, that's great to know because I'm like that older son or I'm like that younger son. But at some point, if they don't get their act together, isn't the father going to explode in anger and unleash all of the fury that they deserved? I mean, that father said nothing to the younger son about repaying all the inheritance that had been wasted, but if that kid continues to be foolish, won't the father change his mind? Won't he demand to be repaid what was lost and what he is owed? Things *could* get really ugly if those guys don't toe the line from here on out."

Of course, we don't really care about the *story*. What we care about is whether or not God at some point will do something like that to us! I mean, it's great that God is forgiving and all of that, but doesn't He *eventually* get mad? At some point, will we cross a hidden line where He'll simply get fed up and 'smite us' (to use the King James Bible term)?

Because so many of us don't know the answer, we don't relate to God very well. We acknowledge Him, appreciate Him, reverence Him even ... but we keep Him at arm's length, only calling on Him in moments of desperation when there is nowhere else to turn ... because we're afraid.

But the Bible paints a very different picture of how it is supposed to be; what a *normal* relationship with God should look like.

**The writer of the NT book of Hebrews puts it like this:**

*Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16 (NIV)*

Approach the throne of grace with confidence not fear.

**Other translations say it even more vividly:**

*Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. Hebrews 4:16 (NLT)*

Let us approach God boldly, with confidence.

And, actually, the tense of the Greek verb in that sentence implies continuous action: to come to the throne and *keep on* coming to the throne; to boldly approach God and to *keep on* boldly approaching God *over and over again*, as a pattern of life.

And notice that the implication here is that we go to the throne not because we have it all together; not because we've cleaned up our act. The writer tells us to go because we need to experience mercy and grace ... *again*. We're told to go because, even though the Father has welcomed us back into His house and we belong there, we've messed up ... *again*.

Of course, whenever you mess up again and again after someone has been gracious and forgiving to you, what you really want to do is run and hide ... not boldly approach! So we need to figure something out today, something that will help us do that even though it doesn't seem natural to us, even though we want to do the exact opposite. What we need to figure out is *whether God really is a God of love ... or God really is a god of anger*.

### **Analyzing God**

And when you read the scripture, it's a little difficult to determine because there are definitely two sides to God: an angry side and a loving side.

Let's just take Jesus himself, for example. We can do that because the NT book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus "radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God<sup>i</sup> so, whatever we see in his actions and in his words, that tells us what God is like.

And what do we see? In some places, the Gospels show us a Jesus who stomps and snorts like a horse when He is angry (that's the meaning of the Greek word *enebrimesato* which always gets translated as "anger") – and it seems like Jesus is angry quite often.

For example:

- Whenever, in the Gospels, Jesus encounters the destruction wrought by demons, disease and death he's almost always *enebrimesato*.

- Whenever he deals with people who've been his closest friends or seen his miracles and still refuse to believe in him as the Messiah, he is, again, *enebrimesato*.
- And when he deals with religious leaders who have lost sight of the calling of Israel to be God's light to the non-Jewish world and who have instead made that world the enemy ... he's *enebrimesato*, snorting angry.

Yet, in other places, the Gospels show us a loving Jesus who:

- Instead of being angry with the corrupt tax-collector Zaccheus, he is kind. "You know, I don't really care what you've done, and I don't care what everyone else thinks of you, Zack, I'm coming over for dinner today," which is a big deal in that time.
- Instead of being *enebrimesato* with a woman caught in the very act of adultery, he is tolerant. "I don't condemn you. Go and sin no more."
- Instead of snorting in anger at the disciple He knows will eventually betray him, he is patient. He lets Judas walk beside him for over three years.

And that's just the example of Jesus. If we had the time, we could spend hours looking at the Old Testament and how, on the one hand, God was characterized by lovingkindness in choosing the nation of Israel and, on the other, by judgement. I don't think there is anyone here who isn't aware of the instances when God told the nation of Israel to completely wipe out another nations or the times when He caused the ground to open up and swallow those children of Israel who refused to believe in Him and obey Him.

So, it's confusing. How can both of those seemingly opposite characteristics exist in the same person at the very same time? How can God be both furious *and* gentle, enraged *and* inviting, at the same time?

One way that people try to answer that question is to say that "well, maybe God is angry at *some* people and in *some* situations; but with *other* people and *other* situations, he is kind, patient and tolerant."

### **1. Maybe God is *not* both love and anger at the same time."**

And, on the surface, that makes sense. But I think it's too simplistic. Do you think Jesus *wasn't* angry about people being cheated out of their hard-earned money by tax-collectors like Zacchaeus? Do you think Jesus *wasn't* angry about the sin of adultery and betrayal and what it did to individuals, families and society in general? *He had to be angry*. There had to be an underlying level of anger even at those with whom He was gracious.

In the same way, when it comes to those people who were on the receiving end of his *enebrimesato* – those religious leaders, for instance – did Jesus not also want *them* to repent? Did he not desire that they too would come to the place where they could say, "Oh my, we have screwed up so bad, what were we thinking? What have we done? *We are so sorry*." I think Jesus wanted that responses. I think the fact that he didn't call down fire from Heaven in judgement on them (as his disciples once suggested he do) shows that there was a level of kindness, tolerance and patience even with those who angered him the most.

Somehow with all of these people and in all of these situations, Jesus really was both patient *and* furious at the same time, so this answer can't be right.

## **2. Another answer is to say that “maybe God is schizophrenic.”**

And a lot of people think this, though they might not use that word because it's disrespectful. They think “the God of the Old Testament” – is angry and judgmental ... “Jesus, kind of like the God of the New Testament” ... He is loving and kind. They divide the two: Old/New, Father/Son, Bad Cop/Good Cop and, like a schizophrenic person, there is a constant battle to see which one is going to come out. You just never know.

But that kind of a divide isn't there in the scripture. Jesus was angry, as we've seen. And God, in the OT, was also loving.

## **3. Yet another answer is to say that “maybe God is mostly one or the other.”**

Maybe God is mostly love with a little anger. Or maybe God is mostly anger with a little love.

A lot of times, people will read the scripture and develop “portraits of God” who look like one of those options – a God who is mostly angry or a God who is mostly love. It should be pointed out, however, that those portraits often tend to look a lot like the person doing the painting.

In other words, we create God in *our* image. If *we're* mostly angry with a little love, that's how we see God when we read the scripture. If *we're* mostly tolerant with a little anger thrown in, that's the God we “see” in the Bible.

### **What God (as God) Must Do**

I think you see the problem with all of these answers: *none of them fit the scriptural data*. God is fully a god of love and God is fully a god of anger ... simultaneously. And he's not schizo. We can't downplay one side or the other or pit them against each other and still be talking about the God of the Bible.

But what's amazing, I think, is that *God can't do that either*. God cannot downplay His anger or his love towards sinners and still be God. God *must fully express both* in order to be truly holy, righteous and perfect, for two reasons.

#### **1. Perfect justice requires that God's anger rain down on those who sin (people like you and me).**

As God, God *has* to be angry with sin and sinners, or God is not perfect.

And, to illustrate why I say that, let's put it in human terms. Let's imagine that there is a judge somewhere who said, “well, you know, in my personal opinion, stealing is not *that* big of a deal ... and that person you robbed had more than enough already, you weren't really hurting him ... so I'm going to look the other way on your crime”, we would argue that something is wrong with that judge. Why? Because *perfect* justice demands that the law be upheld at every point. It demands a ruthless accountability for all deviance. It demands that a record of wrongs be kept and judged.

Not only that, *perfect* justice demands an impartial approach to sentencing for those wrongs. For justice to be truly upheld, if you do the crime, you must do the time. If the law says an offender must receive a certain

punishment, a righteous judge can't say, "Well, yeah, you're guilty, but, I feel like I had a good golf game today so I'm going to look the other way and let you walk away." The full expression of the anger of the law must rain down on the one who has broken it.

And if God is truly holy, righteous and perfect, He, too, must uphold this standard. He must be angry at sin and sinners.

At the same time, however, he must also be loving and gracious towards those same sinners because ...

**2. Perfect love *requires* that grace "rain down" on those who sin (as the song we sang earlier put it).**

As God, God *has* to be gracious with sin and sinners, or God is not perfect. Here's why:

Perfect love (or *agape*' as the Greeks called it) is unconditional. It loves no matter what. It never stops hoping or believing. It bears all things, endures all things. It always returns good for evil instead of evil for evil. Always.

For someone to be perfectly loving, they must always be seeking ways to do that which is astonishing in the face of sin and rejection and rebellion: to show kindness, to show tolerance and to show patience.

And if God is truly holy, righteous and perfect, He must uphold this standard as well.

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See the tension here? If God *doesn't* offer kindness, tolerance and patience to sinners, then God doesn't love perfectly. Yet, if God isn't also angry, even enraged, over sin, then God isn't perfectly just and righteous in all of His ways. Without a full expression of both anger and love and grace, God is not worthy of being called God.

Now, here's the deal: if we don't understand how God does that without being schizo, we're not going to know how to relate to Him. We're going to be afraid because we don't know at any given moment if we're going to get the angry God or the gracious God. We're going to run and hide instead of boldly approaching.

So, how does God resolve this tension? How does God simultaneously embrace these two qualities of his perfect nature that seem to be mutually exclusive?

*This, friends, is the genius ... of the cross ... on which Jesus died, because ...*

**Both demands – the demand for anger and the demand for grace – are fully satisfied together on the cross.**

When Jesus was nailed to a cross and left to die in humiliation outside of Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago, something more than the execution of a political threat against Rome was taking place; something more than the removal of a charismatic figure with the power to undermine the religious establishment was taking place.

And that something more was that God himself was fulfilling the requirements of justice and of love all in the same moment. Anger and love towards sinners like you and me were meeting and resolving in the only way

they could: *through the death of the second person of the Trinity that we call the Son of God, the Christ, through the death of Jesus of Nazareth.*

## The Genius of the Cross

So, how was that happening on the cross?

It's not simple, but let me see if I can explain it simply. I'm going to give you two statements that sum it up as best as I know how:

**1. On the cross, God's amazing grace was expressed as Jesus (God in the flesh) voluntarily became the representative of the whole human race.**

Now, I could go into a long explanation of why Jesus was the only possible representative; a long explanation of how his full-humanity and his perfect life uniquely qualified him alone for that role, but I'm not going to because the point is simply that Jesus – God in the flesh – had the ability to be our representative and He chose to do so as *the ultimate act of love and grace.*

**As the Apostle Paul once put it:**

*You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. (you heard all about this). Though he was rich (he was God; he was perfect), yet for your sakes he became poor (he let all that go; he took your place)... 2 Corinthians 8:9 (NLT)*

He fulfilled the demand of what God as God *ought* to graciously do: to go to the cross to represent the human race.

Ok, that's statement number one. Here is statement #2:

**2. On the cross, God's full anger was unleashed against humanity as Jesus was allowed to die.**

As we've seen, God (as God) cannot play games with sin; He can't pretend it doesn't exist; He can't slack off on the sentencing for sin and the sentencing for sin was very clear, from the very first pages of the Bible: *you sin, you die.* So, Humanity must be judged and condemned if God is to be God.

And that's what happened when Jesus, our representative, was allowed to die a horrible death in the worst form of execution known to man – crucifixion.

**As Paul described it ...**

*God made Him who knew no sin (i.e., Jesus) to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB77)*

And what a vivid description! In his amazing grace, Jesus takes our place; literally He becomes the payment, the ransom for sin. And in the righteous and just anger of God, He is put to death. And, that's how the tension *in God* is resolved through the cross.

It's genius. It's *genius*.

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Now, at this point, some of you may be thinking “This sounds really interesting. I’ve never heard that before, but, I can see the logic in it. But it sounds a little impersonal. It kind of feels like there’s a cosmic spiritual transaction going on out there, but I’m not really involved in it. I’m kind of like a not-so-innocent bystander, so I can’t quite relate to this.”

And it is hard to put ourselves into the middle of that scenario, so I want to focus it down a bit to the individual level. Fortunately for us, in another letter, Paul goes into even more detail about this “transaction of the cross” so to speak. And he makes it really personal.

**He says that God has ...**

*... forgiven us all our transgressions all our sins, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us, He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Colossians 2:13-14 (NASB77)*

Now let me talk about what this means, let me explain what this means, because it’s vitally important.

Remember when I said that perfect justice demands a ruthless accounting, even a record-keeping of wrong doing? Guess what? That’s actually what happens in the spiritual realm. There is, Paul says in this verse, a certificate of debt that lists all the charges against us, all the charges against you, all the charges against me.

Now, when Paul first wrote this, all of his readers would have understood something very significant that we don’t even see because our culture is different. In *their* culture, whenever someone went into debt, the certificate of debt was handwritten by the debtor himself.<sup>ii</sup> They would literally write out an IOU.

So, in essence, what Paul is saying in this verse is that, through our lives, we are each writing our own “divine IOU” (so to speak). Every time we sin, we add to our list. And that list, that certificate, is a hostile witness against us. It says that we are guilty and we deserve whatever punishment God would righteously pour out on us. But then Paul says, through his death, Jesus cancelled this IOU (and, in the Greek, that word literally means “blotted out”). So, the picture here is that Jesus is taking the certificate with all of our stuff on it, nailing it to the cross and then erasing it with his own blood.

Sounds a little like that song the band did right before the message, doesn’t it?

You take away the pen  
writing out my every sin  
And you burn the book  
of my rebellion;  
You tear the pages  
holding everything that I regret  
How You forgive me!

Friends, this is how God forgives us. Through the genius of The Cross, through the holy marriage of God's righteous and just anger and his gracious love, Jesus actually takes our personal IOUs, pays them himself and then blots them out.

And, *that* starts to feel a little more personal. Can you see how what Jesus did on the cross affects you and me as individuals? The debt is canceled. There is no more record of what you've done or what I've done, or will do.

Several years ago, I discovered a short story – sort of a parable – that helped me to really visualize what this means on a very personal basis. Maybe it will help you as I read it.

In that place between wakefulness and dreams, I found myself in the room. There were no distinguishing features save for one wall covered with small index card files ... which stretched from floor to ceiling and seemingly endlessly in either direction.

As I drew near the wall, the first file to catch my attention was one labeled 'People I Have Liked.' I opened it and began flipping cards. I quickly shut it, shocked to realize that I recognized the names written on each one.

And then, without being told, I knew exactly where I was. This lifeless room with its small files was a crude catalog system for *my life*. Here were written the actions of every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn't match.

A sense of wonder and curiosity coupled with horror stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their content. Some brought joy and sweet memories; others a sense of shame and regret so intense that I would look over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching.

The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I Have Read," "Lies I Have Told," "Comfort I Have Given," "Jokes I Have Laughed At."

Some were almost hilarious in their exactness: "Things I've Yelled at My Brothers." Others I couldn't laugh at: "Things I Have Done in Anger," "Things I Have Muttered Under My Breath."

I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the life I had lived. Could it be possible that I had the time in my short life to write each of these thousands or even millions of cards? But each card confirmed this truth. Each was written in my own handwriting. Each signed with my own signature.

When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts," I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card.

An almost animal rage came over me. One thought dominated my mind: "No one must ever see these cards! No one must ever see this room! I have to destroy them!" In an insane frenzy I yanked the file out. Its size didn't matter now. I had to empty it and burn the cards.

But as I took it at one end and began pounding it on the floor, I could not dislodge a single card. I became desperate and pulled out a card, only to find it as strong as steel when I tried to tear it.



Defeated and utterly helpless, I returned the file to its slot. Leaning my forehead against the wall, I let out a long, self-pitying sigh. And then I saw it. The title read “People I Have Encouraged to Seek God.” The handle was brighter than those around it, newer, almost unused. I pulled on it and a small box not more than 3 inches long fell into my hands. I could count the cards it contained on one hand.

And then the tears came. I cried out of shame, from the overwhelming shame of it all. No one must ever, ever know of this room. I must lock it up and hide the key.<sup>iii</sup>

Every one of us has a “room” like that, don’t we, filled with evidence of our sinful depravity that would embarrass and humiliate us, were it open for all to see? Evidence that we’ve not lived up to God’s holy law. Evidence that we have not lived up even to our own standards.

So if Jesus by chance came to your card-file room, and looked into the drawers marked “Things I Said in Anger”, “Bad attitudes I had”, “People I never forgave” or “What I Did When No One Was Watching” what do you think would happen? Would he be angry? Would he be gracious – kind, tolerant, patient?

Yes ... and yes ... because of the cross.

As I looked through my tears, I saw Him. No, please not Him. Oh, anyone but Jesus!

I watched helplessly as He began to open the files and read the cards. He seemed to intuitively go to the worst boxes. Why did He have to read every one?

He turned and looked at me from across the room. His eyes were filled with *anger* ... and pity.

I dropped my head, covered my face with my hands and began to cry again. He walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so many things. But He didn't say a word. He just cried with me.

Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files. Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file and, one by one, began to sign His name over mine on each card.

“No!” I shouted rushing to Him. His name shouldn't be on these cards. They were *my* sinful deeds! But there it was, written in red so rich, so dark, so alive. The name of Jesus covered mine. It was written with His blood.

I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly, but the next instant it seemed I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, “It is finished.”<sup>iv</sup>

“It is finished” ... the final words of Jesus on the cross, as his blood paid the debt you and I owe for sin. It covers our sins. It takes away the sin-IOU of every wrong thing we’ve ever done or will do and makes us righteous and holy before our Heavenly Father, as if we’d never sinned.

**... which is why Paul writes ...**

*We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins.*

*And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done. Romans 3:22 [NLT]*

Paul is telling us that when we trust in Jesus and what he did on the cross, Jesus says “I’m going to cover your IOUs. I’m going to nail them to the cross and take them away.”

Friends, this is why, so many times around here we call a “time out” and ask people, “Where are you with God? Have you come to the place in your life where you’ve said ‘I am a sinner, and yes I need a savior, and yes I believe that Jesus is my savior?’”

Maybe today some of you, maybe for the first time, are getting this and starting to make the connection between Jesus on the cross and you, and saying, “I get it, now what am I supposed to do?”

It’s very simple - just put your faith in Jesus. Just say “Jesus I believe you. I believe in what you did. I know that I can’t justify myself – my card-files are so numerous I can’t even count - but I believe you died for me on the cross.”

### **Communion**

I think that’s what some of us need to do this morning. But I think all of us would benefit from doing something that would make this even more real. As we close today we’re going to do a little ceremony called communion that offers us the opportunity to express our trust in what Jesus did to take away our sins. (Ask the band to get into place). While they’re getting ready, I want you to do three things, in your mind..

1. I want you to imagine that somewhere out there is a spiritual certificate of sin debt with your name on it. However you can visualize it - maybe it’s a wall, maybe it’s a certificate - it has your name on it.
2. And I want you to think about what kinds of things you have written on it and are writing on it with your life – where you have let God down and where you have let others down, where you’ve not lived up to your own standards.
3. And then I want you to imagine that certificate being nailed to the cross with Jesus. Imagine Jesus on the cross and above him someone is nailing your sin certificate.

I want you to visualize all of that for a minute.

Now, we’re going to do what we read at the very beginning of this message. Remember?

*Let us come **boldly** to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. Hebrews 4:16 (NLT)*

After the band starts playing, I want you to come to a communion station and take the bread and juice that reminds us that Jesus gave his body and blood to *cover* that certificate of sin debt, that IOU. And as you receive the bread and juice, thank Jesus and say “Jesus I trust in you and thank you for taking care of my certificate.”

And again, remember when we come to the table, we don’t come because we have it all together. We don’t come

because “Oh, we’re really sorry *this* time.” We come because of Jesus and what He did on the cross. We can be bold. We come because we need to be reminded that God’s anger and God’s love came together at the cross in a way that makes mercy and grace ours for the asking, again and again and again.

Let’s pray.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Hebrews 1:3

<sup>ii</sup> For an example, see Philemon 1:1

<sup>iii</sup> Joshua Harris, *The Room*, see [www.new-life.net/favrt01.htm](http://www.new-life.net/favrt01.htm)

<sup>iv</sup> Harris