

Maundy Thursday, April 1

Focus: God is good and cannot let evil go unpunished

Function: That the hearers experience rescue from the problem of God's justice

Malady: God cannot let justice slide, and thus we are powerless before God

Means: God's mercy allows means by which God's justice passes us by

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Tonight let's picture Jesus and His 12 students, His disciples reclining around a table eating dinner together. This meal, celebrated by all the Jews on this one day every year with friends and family. Jews would travel literally thousands of miles to make it to Jerusalem for the meal. And it was during this solemn occasion that the steps were taken in painstaking order to remember. First the cup of wine, then the separate dishes in sequential order. Just the right song sung at just the right time as to not make light of this tradition that was the core of their religious belief. Done the same way every year for 1500 years. And Jesus presides over this meal tonight. And the disciples know each step, each song by heart, because this traditional meal the Passover had been the center of their spiritual life for as long as they can remember. But wait, near the end of this meal, this night, the host Jesus does something different. He stops the singing, stops the meal, looks at His disciples. They can tell something is different, something has changed. Why is Jesus doing this? Why is He breaking from tradition? And what He says next, what He does next, outside of their traditions, will change the course of human history.

And so to understand what the importance of this meal, the Passover, is and why Jesus would choose to change it we must look far back into human nature and human history. We must look at the nature of God.

God as revealed to us in the Bible is essentially good. That's His nature. We live in a world today that says God is good or should be good but we must be careful what we ask for. Because we must realize that a good God is not always going to be a nice God. A good God must stand for justice. We sugarcoat the Christian God to make Him not good. If God is good then He can't let those who do bad go without justice. So we don't want to believe in a good God, or a fair God, we believe in a genie God, the God of the Force from Star Wars. Not a person or a being with personal attributes that we're made in the image of, no we want an impersonal God, a God that isn't about right or wrong or being fair, just a God who's a vending machine. If God is good, then there must be justice. And what is justice? Making sure that the consequences of doing bad things don't go unpunished.

It is under this basic principal that we must take a look at the story of the Passover. Some 1500 years before Jesus God's people were in trouble, enslaved in Egypt. And God was going to show Egypt that He was more powerful than anything the Egyptians would dream of. So on that fateful Passover night, God promised that He would send the angel of death into all of Egypt, and God would exact His righteousness and goodness upon the land. Any firstborn in Egypt guilty of doing evil in God's eyes, guilty of breaking God's laws, guilty of disobeying God, would die. God's justice would come to pass in a way that would leave no margin for doubt or error in the eyes of the Egyptians. This was it.

But there's a sobering element in here, one that is rather disturbing...the people of God weren't without evil in their hearts themselves. The reason they were picked to be God's people was not that they were good. It was because God chose them, simple as that. That's it. This implies that all firstborn, and all of us who are not as well, must also be guilty of evil. If not, then God would have been selective with the angel of death but He wasn't was He? No exceptions, no excuses, just judgment. Scathing to say the least. If God was going to demonstrate His goodness to the world, than all who are guilty of evil at any point or in any measure must stand to be judged. And the hopelessness of the matter would have fallen on both Egyptian and Hebrew alike.

But the point is not that God enacts justice, it's that God finds a solution to the problem of His justice in the Passover. That's the point! It's a way around His own nature, His own standards. And how's that? He provides

means by which His justice is diverted. It is absorbed by someone else. There's a price to it. The victim at the time of this final showdown was to be a helpless little lamb. God's people went out a few days before that night the angel of death was to go through and they were to pick out a lamb. They then brought the lamb, we'll call him fluffy, into the home for a few days, taking care of him. And the whole time the children would want to get attached to fluffy the lamb and the parents would say "don't get attached to him, because he's going to have to die." And the kids would say "why daddy?" and the father would say "because we have disobeyed God and we have done evil," to which the children with tears welling up in their eyes would say "but daddy, that isn't fair. The lamb hasn't done anything wrong." And the parent would say "I know it's not fair for the lamb. But God is good and someone has to pay the price for the bad things we do." And on that day, the lamb would be killed. So the lamb and the lamb's blood stepped in the way to take the hit. Like a bodyguard taking the shot of God's justice. And because the lamb died in the place of each family the angel of death would pass over that house and God's justice wouldn't come upon them. And God provided it as well. So He can be both good and merciful (which aren't equals, they're actually quite opposite) at the same time. It's all God's act.

This is the underpinning of the entire Passover event. It was upon this that the people remembered. In this God initiated a plan for animal deaths in the place of human death. After the Passover God led His people to that mountain and established not one-off sacrifices but an entire system of them based solely on the principal demonstrated during the Passover. So there would be a continual progression of sacrifices done in the place of God's people. This good God, standing for justice, was also the one that provided the means to bypass His justice.

But with the bodyguard image, there's also something equally powerful. Each time an animal took the shot for the guilty party, that animal's blood was done. Finished. A new animal would take the punishment. Or would have to. And in this image there would be very little peace. There could be no peace, because the consequences of your actions would follow you around, and God's justice would have to be repeatedly appeased. This may seem silly to us but it is so absolutely true today as well. People who can never feel forgiven or good enough, carrying around the burdens of life around with them in a bag. And each time there is forgiveness or acceptance it seems some of the burden is gone but it's still there. No matter how we try to drown it out or whatever we do to avoid it it always comes up to bite us again. That's the nature of the beast.

And so Jesus is in the middle of the Passover celebration when He does something completely different. Yes, the disciples came together to remember that God had provided the lamb that one eventful night to divert the justice of God away from themselves. This was continued on in the sacrificial system, it was a part of the Jewish life. A continual turn to God for the diversion from justice. But this night Jesus does something different. At the end of the Passover meal He takes bread and says "Take, eat, this is my Body," and "Drink, this is my blood, poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus makes it more than just remembering how God worked, He says that God is working now! Not blood poured out for one person or one entity for one sin, but poured out for all for the forgiveness of all sins. That night 1500 years ago when God got around His own justice that lamb was pointing to The Lamb of God to come. Jesus says that He is the last sacrifice, the final one, pointed to for 1500 years but never really understood. Instead of many animal sacrifices, afraid of God's wrath, now there's only one and the sacrifice, the diversion, is final. On the cross he cried "it is finished" The sacrificial system was now and forever complete, finished. So for 2000 years we also have gathered to partake in Jesus' body and blood, given once for forgiveness of all. The Passover is completed, and we receive forgiveness. Jesus is actually here in the meal we're about to take. We don't have to understand how, we just take Him at His word. But now we see it not just as another thing Jesus said or commanded, but as the fulfillment of millennia of God's promises fulfilled.