

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on June 29, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb on Exodus 34:5-7.

Series: Good Questions – Honest Answers

Today's Focus: What is God Really Like?

“God is Consistent”

1. In His Love

2. In His Justice

Today we're starting a new series that I've called Good Questions – Honest Answers. A lot of these are questions people have asked me in one way or another in one of my Bible 101 classes. They're not all easy questions. Some of them are tough. I want to be honest with you right off the bat that some of the answers are going to challenge you. Sometimes they challenge me too. But over these summer months here I'm going to do my best to help you see for yourself how the Bible answers these questions. So let's begin with a prayer, asking God to bless us and make this a profitable time together, ok?

We pray. Lord God, in getting to know others I've learned that so many people, people who are even right here today, feel like they're living in a dark, dark world. And I know that the light, your light, is still there... but sometimes it seems so hard to find and so many are in the dark about how to find it. They are confused when it comes to you and the light of your truth. They're searching for light in a world of darkness. They don't know what to believe. They search for answers to their questions, but they look in all the wrong places.

So starting today with this new series, O gracious God, dissolve the fog and let your light shine on us. Dispel the darkness and illuminate our minds and our hearts. Show us what we need to know about you and remove whatever intellectual, emotional, or spiritual obstacles that each of us has to deal with that we might know what you are really like, trust in you, and come more and more into the light of your word so that we can look forward confidently to the day when we will see you face to face in all your bright glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Now as we get into it today let me ask you, What comes to mind when you hear the name Donald Sterling? If you're like me you probably didn't even know who he was until recently and I guess I personally would've been fine not ever knowing who he was. Or what about Miley Cyrus? For some of you I imagine that your feelings regarding her may have changed over the last couple years. Or at least I hope! Or the name of Donald Trump? Or how about Nelson Mandela? Or someone like Abraham Lincoln?

I think we all understand that with a name comes a reputation, right? Sometimes we hear a name and have good feelings. Sometimes we hear a name and have some pretty negative feelings. Maybe there are even some names that when you hear the name you can't help but have angry feelings. Well what comes to mind when you hear the name, God? I think that's another way to approach the question that a lot of people have, "What is God really like?"

To get an answer to that question today we're going to be heading into a book of the Bible called Exodus, chapter 34. Let me give you a little context though first. If you were here last week, Caleb Schultz introduced us to a man named Moses. Remember Moses was the man God used to help rescue the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. Moses was the man God worked through to make a special covenant with the Hebrew people. God chose the Hebrew people out of pure undeserved grace and he gave them his law carved onto stone tablets.

For some of you here with us today when you hear the name Moses you probably picture him as Charlton Heston in the movie The Ten Commandments. For others of you, you maybe picture him instead as the animated character from the movie The Prince of Egypt. So maybe some of you have a picture in your mind of what you think Moses might've looked like.

Well Moses actually kind of wanted to see what God looks like. In chapter 33 of Exodus, in the verses that come shortly before our sermon text today, Moses sort of makes a demand of God. He says, *"Now show me your glory!"* (Ex. 33:18). Show me what you're really like, God! And you know what God said? Listen to this: *"I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. 20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:19-20).*

So as we try and answer the question today, "What is God really like?" it would be good for us to understand that we're not trying to see what God looks like physically or something like that. And we're not in the position of making demands of God either. Because one thing about God is that he is so holy and perfect that no sinner or imperfect person can stand on their own two feet before him. You don't want to play games with God or mess around with him. He can put up with our honest questions. But he won't put up with persistent, defiant arrogance.

And by the way this isn't just something we learn about God from the Old Testament. It's there in the New Testament as well. For example it describes God as someone [who] *alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see* (1 Timothy 6:16). I mention this because it's fashionable today for people to try and reinvent God by talking about him as if he has been evolving right along with our society. What I mean is that's getting popular for people to wrongly say that God in the Old Testament was sort of this bigoted, frowny faced deity but that God in the New Testament is a tolerant, smiley faced deity. And so today, as this thinking, goes, God has evolved even further to be just fine with whatever you believe or however you want to live. Rather what I hope to help you see today is that God hasn't been evolving. God has been and always will be consistent to who he really is. Especially today I want to help you see that **God is consistent in his love and in his justice.**

So God told Moses, *"No one can see me and live."* Yet God did allow Moses to see some of his glory and experience some degree of his presence. Here's what happened. God took Moses and placed him in the cleft of the rock face on the top of Mt. Sinai which is in present day Saudi Arabia. In the cleft of the rock Moses would be shielded from seeing the full glory of God and so would be spared death. But even

more important than what Moses would see as God passed by is what God had to say. We find this in Exodus 34:5-7. Martin Luther once called these verses the sermon God preached about himself.

⁵ *Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD.*

⁶ *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. 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."*

Did you notice the name God used to describe himself? The LORD. All capital letters. This was the special Hebrew name for God. Unlike today where people hardly think twice about using the name of God or Jesus as a curse word, this name of God was so sacred that the Hebrew people didn't even pronounce it. They wouldn't speak it. They had no "OMG" in their vocabulary either. In fact because of that we're not even sure exactly how it would've been pronounced this name of God. The best guess seems to be "Yahweh". But this name, the LORD, or Yahweh, is a form of the Hebrew verb "to be." In other words the name means something like "I AM." Or "The one who is, who was, who will be." So God wants to remind us right off the bat that his very essence and nature is eternal. He has always existed.

I mean we know that everything that begins to exist has a cause, right? A couple years ago when we found moths in our pantry we knew they didn't just appear there out of nowhere. Those pantry moths began to exist in our pantry. Therefore we were compelled to hunt for the cause. Now we know that the universe began to exist. Science confirms this. Therefore the universe must also have a cause. What must that cause be? It can only be something that is un-caused. God. God who alone is eternal. Who alone is also changeless. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He always has been and always will be just as he described himself to Moses.

So what does God, the LORD, especially want to teach us about himself in this sermon that he preached first to Moses? He wants to teach us that he is consistent. **God was, is, and always will be consistent in his love and in his justice.** Like two sides of the same coin it's important to understand especially these two sides of God's eternal, unchanging nature. **God is consistent in his love and in his justice.**

First let's talk about how God is consistent in his love. ⁶ *And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.*

Just think about this. When God wanted to tell us what he is really like, where did he start? With a display of his power? Or with his wrath? Or by saying, "I'm like an 18 wheeler and you are all gonna be just a bunch of bugs on my windshield"? No, but with his love! He starts with his love! That more than anything else, is what God wants us to know about him. He is consistent in his love. He is full of mercy and grace. He doesn't treat people as harshly as they deserve and he even gives people blessings that they don't deserve. He is patient and long-suffering. He is slow to anger.

One of Jesus' disciples named Peter agreed and says this about God, *"He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance"* (2 Peter 3:9b). That is what God wants

more than anything else. He wants to show love because that's who he is. That is why he is slow to anger.

Any of you see the Noah movie with Russell Crowe as Noah that came out a few months ago? I know a number of you went to see it thinking it would inspire faith and you ended up being greatly disappointed. One of the reasons why is that it portrayed God as sort of a cruel and sadistic monster, as if what God wanted most was to kill everyone. But this is far from the truth! In the book of Genesis what we actually see is a God who, even when everyone had corrupted their ways and rebelled against him, even when there was only a small group of believers left, he waited 120 more years to give people a chance to repent. The door to the ark remained open all those years. Why? Because God is slow to anger. He is consistent in his love.

Likewise, when the LORD sent the children of Israel in to take the land of Canaan and told them to wipe out the people there, on the one hand it might seem like God was being harsh and cruel. And I'll admit this has been a tough one at times for me to wrap my mind around. But on the other hand the Bible is also clear that God had waited over 500 years before bringing judgment on their wickedness and cruelty. They had countless opportunities to turn to God and be spared. God wasn't acting on a whim. Why? Because God is slow to anger. He is consistent in his love.

He is abounding in it and faithful to his promise of rescuing from their sins all who turn to him in repentance. That is why the LORD preserved the Hebrew nation so that he could keep his promise of sending a Savior, a promise he kept when he sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, born of the virgin Mary, into our world to suffer and die for the sins of all people of all time so that no one can say, "O but my sin is too grievous to be forgiven." Or "O but I myself I am too big a failure to be loved by God." Rather it's just the opposite.

⁸ If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8-10).

I bring up this verse because it's easy to take the "abounding in love" part of God's nature for granted. We get so used to thinking about God's consistent and faithful love that we can start to think, "Since love wins, it's doesn't really matter how I live, or what I say, or how I act...because God will forgive me anyway. So who cares if continue on with this grudge? Who cares if God wants me to act with integrity at work, or with faithfulness in marriage, or with patience towards my children? Who cares if I make the pursuit of more and more money into my own version of a golden calf? After all God is abounding with forgiveness. It's like a fountain full of grace that just keeps spilling over the top."

And perhaps that's why God finishes his sermon to us and to Moses by saying, "*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.*" Now clearly this sounds serious, doesn't it? So let's not water it down. Let's not soften it. But let's also be clear about what it doesn't mean so that you don't miss out on what it does mean, ok? Because here's what it doesn't mean. And this is just letting Scripture interpret Scripture which is always important to do. Because if God is consistent to who he really is then we can trust that

so is his word. And his word is very clear about this: No one is held personally accountable for the sins of someone else. In other words you don't have to worry about being punished for the sins of your parents. If your dad was a bad dad and he sinned against you that doesn't mean God is going to hold you accountable for his sins. Rather the Bible clearly teaches, *The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son* (Ezekiel 18:20).

Ok so what's God saying then here about himself? Simply this. God is consistent not only in his love. He is consistent also in his justice. In other words God is holy. He is just. God cannot just overlook sin or ignore it. But where people ignore sin and overlook God their just punishment for their sins continues to pursue them down through each generation of individuals who choose to walk down the same path of their rebellion against God like their parents. A holy God can never just look the other way and pretend like sin never happened. That would go against who he really is. Every generation that walks willfully away from God will find God to be for them a stern judge.

Now is there a part of you that thinks that this second part of God's description of who he really is sounds contradictory to the first part? How can both these things be true? How can God forgive sin and punish sin at the same time? Because God had a plan. A plan that would allow him to remain consistent to who he really is. A plan to pay for sin. A plan at the same time to show his love to a whole world full of sinners in the hope that they would turn from the wayward paths of their sins and come back home to him.

Here was God's plan. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. He sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins. Listen carefully, *25 God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus* (Romans 3:25-26).

How can we make sense of the reality that God is consistent in his love and his justice? Only at the cross where God showed his love and carried out his justice. Out of faithful love God provided a substitute, his sinless son, our Savior Jesus Christ, who willingly suffered death and the torment of hell, the just penalty that our sins deserved, so we wouldn't have to. And because Jesus truly paid for sins God can now be called both *just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus*.

Notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say that God justifies those who try harder. It doesn't say God justifies those who think they're better than others. It doesn't even say God justifies those who stop sinning cold turkey altogether. It says he justifies those who have faith in Jesus. That means if you have faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you can rest assured that you are fully pleasing to God, totally accepted, that your wickedness, rebellion, and sin is 100% completely forgiven. This is why the Bible says, *"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"* (Romans 8:1).

So how are you going to react to this? What is your reaction going to be to the fact that God is consistent in his love and in his justice, that that's what he's really like? I pray that your reaction, that my reaction, my families, all of yours, is like Moses'. One of profound reverence and respect for God. Not rebellion against God. Not trying to get away with your sins and thinking you can manipulate God's

grace. Not trying to re-imagine God or invent a different god or ignore God altogether. Rather that your reaction be with one of humble, sincere surrender, reverent repentance. In a word...Worship. This was Moses' reaction. O LORD God of heaven and earth, may it also be ours too this day and always. *8 Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. 9 "Lord," he said, "if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance."* Amen.

My Next Steps

Connect: When you hear the name God or Jesus, what kind of feelings do you associate with that name? Many have negative feelings because they do not really know who God is or what he is like.

Treasure: *25 God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25-26).*

Challenge: Take some time this week to honestly examine how you view and approach God and why you feel this way about him. If you haven't already, commit to regular Bible reading so that you can get to know God better. In particular, after today's sermon, try and identify if a particular section that you are reading is Law or Gospel.