

God is Love, God is Just, God is Merciful

(Some thoughts with Dr. Joel Crichlow)

In 1 John 4:8 (NIV), we read “*Whoever does not love does not know God, because **God is love.***” The actions that we take arise from our character. An apple tree does not bear oranges. In the same way, God’s actions are consistent with His character. Therefore, we can interpret whatever God does as a product of love. What an overwhelming masterpiece of love was God’s gift to us of this universe!

“*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*”, (Genesis 1:1). God made a marvelously, wonderful universe. God initiated a population of good creatures and marvelous human beings. The Psalmist states it this way: “*I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*” (Psalm 139:14). “*The heavens declare the glory of God ...*” (Psalm 19:1).

A key aspect of the wonder of God’s creation is the system of laws that govern the behavior of the universe. For example, there is gravity - you throw an object into the air it eventually returns to the ground. Actions produce results, causes generate effects. Without these laws there would have been unimaginable unpredictability and confusion. Thankfully we can expect the system to be faithful to the laws that govern it. We can view the system as a display of justice. It can be relied upon to behave in a certain way. The astronaut can step out into space and remain in orbit with the spacecraft because the creation is trustworthy, it is just. Indeed, the creator is just - “*the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for **he is a God of justice.***” (Psalm 50:6).

God set up a habitat for man (Adam, the father of the human race) in which man would be the beneficiary of a love relationship with God. “*The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’*” (Genesis 2:15-17). Notice the privilege to choose that God gave to man.

A love relationship is not possible without the element of choice. After God established Adam in a comfortable environment, the Garden of Eden, He then gave him the opportunity to express his love for God. How should man express his love for God? By choosing to obey God! But unfortunately, he chose to disobey.

Within a system of justice obedience cannot produce the same result as disobedience. There will be no distinction between obedience and disobedience if the results were the same, and hence no desire on man’s part to attain to one or the other. Justly, man’s disobedience set up a chain of results that affected not only man negatively but the whole creation. Which creation the Apostle Paul describes in Romans 8: 22 as groaning.

But God is love, therefore, not only did He set man initially in a loving environment, but He followed this up with a number of rules which when obeyed was the way back to good fellowship with a loving God, and the vehicle for living harmoniously and lovingly with our neighbors. These rules are given as the ten commandments in Exodus 20: 3-17:

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; ...

You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ...

Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

You shall not covet ...

We therefore, belong to a community of people who have the privilege to live within a realm of love for God and for each other. But there is the necessary factor of choice (of free will). When we examine those commandments, and examine ourselves we realize that we have failed to keep the commandments. On very many occasions we have chosen to disobey. This is called sin and indeed “*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”, (Romans 3: 23).

How does a God who is love deal with a community of sinners? Think of yourself as the parent of two children – Alpha and Beta. You love them both equally. Alpha is obedient and respectful, Beta is disobedient and rebellious. You love them both, but you would like Beta to be obedient like Alpha, therefore you employ some means whereby Beta would understand that you are not pleased with his/her behavior. Therefore, your love for Alpha and Beta coopts justice. Alpha and Beta must appreciate that actions have consequences, and the consequences of obedience differ from those of disobedience.

Clearly disobeying Father God (sinning against God) fractures the relationship with God, breaks the fellowship with God, separates the sinner from God. This separation from God is called death; “*the wages of sin is death ...*”, (Romans 6:23). Justice is at work here. We reap what we sow. God who is love would be inconsistent in His attributes if He were not just. But “*the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice.*” (Psalm 50:6).

In addition, “*The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him;*” (Daniel 9:9). But how can God be merciful and forgiving towards us when we are under the sentence of death (separation from Him) – the due wages of our sin? His justice demands that we collect those wages. A solution would be if someone (a substitute) who does not deserve that death accepts it in our place. That substitute would have to be sinless in order to qualify. But all have sinned. There is no sinless man.

God who is love provides the solution: “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16). Who is this Son? He is called the Word in John 1:1-14, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made ... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us*”.

That Word, Son of God, Jesus Christ suffered that separation in our place. His crucifixion is reported in all four gospels (Matthew 27, Mark 15, Luke 23, John 19). While dying he uttered: “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” (which means “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”), Matthew 27:46; and “*It is finished*”, John 19:30.

God’s love, God’s justice and God’s mercy came together at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ so that our fellowship with God can be restored forever. “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 6:23).

The physical suffering and death that Jesus experienced allows us to associate rather inadequately the pain of our separation from God with what is arguably man's greatest fear - a painful death. When Jesus cried “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” which He followed with the triumphant declaration: “*It is finished*”, He demonstrated to us that he had suffered that penalty of separation from God for us. We need no longer be separated from God. Thanks be to God!

Then His resurrection from the dead:

*“On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? **He is not here; he has risen!**’” (Luke 24:1-6).*

The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate indication that the curse of separation has been broken, the sting of physical death has been removed. Job had asked the question *“If someone dies, will they live again?”* (Job 14:14). Yes, there is life after death and that life can be lived in eternal fellowship with God. Spiritual death and physical death no longer have dominion over us. Thank God who through His love, His justice and His mercy has granted us this glorious privilege!