

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Maintaining Love to Thousands*

SERIES: *What's in a Name?*

SCRIPTURES: *Exodus 34:5-7*

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**Credit to "God Has A Name" (John Mark Comer); "Old Testament Word Studies" (William Wilson); Cassuto (Exodus Commentary); The Bible Project;*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you and believe it or not, we have made it to the end!

We are in the fifth and final week of our sermon series... **(SERMON SERIES GRAPHIC)**... "What's in a Name?"

We've been going phrase by phrase, through a short passage of Scripture found in Exodus 34, where God tells Moses who He is, what's in His name?

As AW Tozer has said, **"What you believe about God is the most important thing about you?"** It will impact the way you choose to live your life, the person you are becoming.

I've challenged you to memorize this passage of Scripture.

So today is judgement day. Let's try and say it together this morning...without help from the pro-presenter screen. Sound good?

Exodus 34:5-7 - 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.”

Now, if you're like me, when you first read this passage of Scripture 5 weeks ago...I was loving it. Compassionate and gracious. Yes!

Slow to anger. Yes!

Abounding in love and faithfulness. Maintaining love. Forgiving wickedness. Yes, yes, yes...and then stopped in my tracks.

“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!”

Wait, what?!!

And perhaps, throughout the series, you've kind of been wondering...how are we gonna deal with that phrase? Because that phrase seems to be in tension with what've learned about God's character so far.

“How can Yahweh be gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love if he goes MMA (ballistic) on kids?” (Comer)

That's what you were thinking, isn't it? So, thanks for coming to church today, we'll see you all next week.

I'm glad you decided to join us today. Because we're gonna deal with that last phrase.

Now before we jump into the message, I just want to tell you something about Five Forks Church.

We don't want to be a church that picks and chooses what we like in Scripture and then try to ignore, avoid the parts we don't like or that are hard for us to accept or understand.

It's dishonest and fake. It's not helpful to our own faith journey. Because we never get serious about the parts that are challenging. And it's detrimental to the faith of our kids and young people.

This is a major area where the church (not Five Forks) but the church world-wide has failed. We tend avoid the hard parts. And when our friends, kids, teens come asking questions we haven't thought about it ourselves, so we don't have good answers. Far too many young people have walked away from their faith because they got shallow and simplistic answers to challenging questions.

So you need to know if you come to Five Forks, we're gonna be as real and honest as we can be and we're gonna talk about the hard stuff. So ready? Let's try to understand some of this.

A. Punishment should be understood within the context of God's character.

When you come to episodes in Scripture that you don't fully understand, stories we can't fully explain, it's best to start with God's character every time.

So, when it comes to punishment, God it is not about personal vendettas or getting revenge, it's not because He lost his temper and it's not because he secretly enjoys causing hurt in people's lives. It is NOT abusive or manipulative. God's goal is to help you become the person he created you to be. He has your best interest at heart, always.

We know this because of phrases, like the ones immediately prior to the statement about punishment.

7 maintaining love to thousands...

In Hebrew this is that steadfast love we talked about last week.

And it is “to thousands.” It’s kind of like saying God’s love limitless, it has no bounds. It’s not just for a chosen few, it’s for everyone!

...and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Wickedness, rebellion, sin...is kind of like a comprehensive expression for “all human evil”...from thinking evil thoughts, to cutting someone off in traffic to murder and beyond.

We must understand punishment within the context of God’s character.

The prophet Micah says this...

Micah 7:18 - ¹⁸ Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.

God delights in showing mercy. God is eager to forgive. He get’s excited about it. This is his character.

Do you have something in your life that you get eager about or that you delight in?

When our youngest son Keagan wakes up in the morning, very first thing he does is ask for breakfast. And he asks for the same thing, almost every morning. He loves waffles with peanut butter and syrup (**PIC OF WAFFLES WITH PEANUT BUTTER**). We have the same conversation every morning... “Daddy, I’m hungry.” “You are? What would you like for breakfast?” “Waffles with peanut butter and syrup!” He delights in them and he is eager for them. It’s the first thing on his mind.

Do you know what God is eager about? He wakes up early in the morning and the first thing on his mind is: who might I show forgiveness, mercy, love and faithfulness to, today.

So often when we hear the word punishment, we don’t start there. Wherever we end up on this challenging topic, let’s start by trusting His character.

B. Love (forgiveness, mercy, grace) **and punishment are not contradictory, they are complementary.**

He maintains love to thousands, but he does not leave the guilty unpunished;

Sometimes we assume that punishment is in contradiction with God’s love.

“If God loves me, he won’t punish me.”

And certainly there are forms of punishment that are inappropriate and in contradiction to love.

But not all punishment falls into that category. As parents, our kids receive punishment/consequences, when they disobey, not because we don’t love them, but because in fact we do love them. Punishment or consequences in the context of a loving relationship is intended to help eliminate harmful, disobedient behavior. For our kids to help them grow into young men and women of character.

We would not be responsible parents if we just flatly eliminated all punishment for our children's disobedient and rebellious behavior. Yes appropriate and proportional, but still necessary.

I was reading a true story about a little girl named Shauna. **(PIC OF cute 4 year old girl on tricycle)**. When she was only 4 years old and she loved to ride her tricycle around. But in order to keep her safe her parents had given her boundaries.

But she was a strong-willed child and so she kept trying to push her parent's boundaries. How far could she could go? How much could she get away with?

So her mom told her one time, *"Shauna, there's a tree right here. And there's a driveway right there. You can ride your tricycle on the sidewalk in between the driveway and the tree, but you can't go past that. If you go past that you will get punished. You will get a spanking. I have to be inside. I've got stuff to do. But I'm going to be watching you. Don't go past either of those boundaries, or you're going to get that spanking."*

Little Shauna thought about her mother's words for a moment. Then she backed her tricycle right up to her mom, stood up, pointed to her "spanking zone" and said, *"Well you might as well spank me now because I got places to go."* (Ortberg...The Me I Want to Be pg. 16).

We all have some of that rebellious, boundary pushing nature in us and I believe that punishment is part of what helps to do away with that nature.

The truth is love and punishment are not contradictory, instead the right amount, at the right time, as appropriate and proportional are necessary, they balance each other.

I asked this question a couple of weeks ago when we talked about God's anger. But, what kind of God would God be, if he simply overlooked, ignored sin, wickedness, rebellion?

It's fascinating, within the story of Exodus. While Moses is having this conversation with God. The Israelites are at that very moment down at the base of Mount Sinai, building a Golden Calf Idol. They are deliberately breaking the terms of their agreement with God.

And this is only the beginning of the disobedience and unfaithfulness on the part of God's people.

Should God simply ignore the disobedience? Should God punish them? Is there some way God take seriously their disobedience and at the same time remain merciful and loving?

That is the tension we see throughout the entire Bible and even in our own lives. God is abounding in love and yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. We will always have to live within that tension of understanding God's character.

I just did a wedding ceremony about a month ago. And usually during marriage ceremonies, couples have some sort of ritual to symbolize their unity...the coming together of two separate lives. Things like lighting candles or pouring separated containers of sand into one.

But a month ago, I had my very first and now favorite unique unity ceremony. The couple asked if they could make a Peanut butter and jelly sandwich (**PIC OF PBJ SANDWICH**) together.

In one sense it's humorous, silly...but in another, it was the perfect symbolism. Rarely do people have one without the other, because you need both, together in order to get the perfect, complete bite.

You need ketchup and mustard.

You need Batman and Robin.

You need Salt and pepper.

Without one, the relationship is incomplete.

God's conversation with Moses is a reminder that God happens to be the perfect balance of forgiveness and mercy, along with just the right amount of justice/punishment.

We need that balance in order to become the people God created us to be.

Punishment must be viewed within the context of God's character.

Love and punishment are not contradictory, they are intended to balance each other.

Now final piece to this phrase...

C. What about the part where God punishes children?

...he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

Does this mean God punishes kids for their parent's sin?

If I get a speeding ticket...Landon will be "smitted" by God?

It's not likely that this is what the author was trying to say. One of the reasons for thinking this, is because a little later on we find a statement that says the exact opposite:

Deuteronomy 24:16 - ¹⁶ Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin.

In other words, we all receive the consequence of our own bad behavior.

One of my favorite Bible teachers John Ortberg says, that just as a rule of thumb when it comes to reading the Bible (whether you happen to believe it's inspired or not), it's helpful to assume it's written by intelligent people, people who are at least as bright as we are, and they fully understand the "law of contradiction".

When we read two statements that appear to be contradictory, it's best to begin asking, "what is the intent of these statements?"

So, I don't believe the writer here is intending to say that God goes MMA on kids or punishes them for their parents mistakes.

Let me suggest three principles I believe this phrase is trying to articulate:

1. Parents' sin has consequences for their children's future.

When parents sin, children are often collateral damage.

If mom & dad get a divorce. If mom & dad physically, verbally, emotionally abuse their children. Who suffers, at least some of, the consequences? The kids.

Grief, trust issues, insecurity.

Now, listen carefully, I'm not saying children have no hope to overcome the influence of their parents failures. Doesn't mean their lives are hopeless or ruined.

If alcoholism or abuse runs in a family, it doesn't mean children are destined to follow that pattern. In fact, we believe Jesus and life with him is what causes life change and transformation. He overcame death itself.

I'm just saying in general, parents sin, often results in negative consequences for the children. There's an old African proverb that says, "*When the elephants fight the grass get's hurt.*"

And I believe that is in part what this passage is talking about.

Our disobedience and failures will have consequences on future generations.

Second, and closely related to this idea, it is often the case that...

2. Sin runs in the family.

"Like father, like son." "The Apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Again, it's not that someone is destined to turn out like their parents. But our kids, younger generations are watching us. Many of the habits and routines that we live by, get passed on to our children. Including the bad ones.

There's a humorous country song that talks about this idea...the singer says...

*Driving through town, just my boy and me
With a happy meal in his booster seat
Knowing that he couldn't have the toy
'Til his nuggets were gone
A green traffic light turned straight to red*

*I hit my brakes and mumbled under my breath
As fries went a flying and his orange drink covered his lap
Well, then my four year old said a four letter word...and I was concerned
So I said, "Son, now where did you learn to talk like that?"*

*He said, "I've been watching you, dad, ain't that cool?
I'm your buckaroo, I wanna be like you
I wanna do everything you do
So I've been watching you"*

Some of you know I love to run. I try to run most days of the week. So my kids see me running. Little Keagan has picked up on this. He's started running with me.

It does the Father proud.

It's one my good habits. But I have this other bad habit. I'm pretty good with my diet. But I love coke. If I'm not careful, I can easily drink too much coke. Get done running on one of those hot 90 degree summer days and there's nothing better than ice cold coke.

The other day, Keagan and I got done running and he said... "Now we can drink some coke, right dad?"

(PIC OF MEME) Someone from our sermon meeting team, sent me this Meme that I thought was appropriate.

I think these words in Exodus are getting at that idea, a reminder that we are all passing along a lifestyle to the next generation. Some of it good. And some of it bad.

What kind of words are you passing along to the next generation?

What kind of attitudes are you passing along?

What kind of eating habits, drinking habit, daily routines, exercise habits?
How do you deal with stress? How do you talk about people who frustrate you in front of your kids, nephews, nieces, grandkids? How do you resolve conflict? What about your temper? How do you spend your money?
Where does Jesus show up in your life? Is following Jesus that thing we do on Sunday mornings for an hour, so that then we can get on with the important things in life? Does Jesus show up anywhere else in your family?
Do your kids see you opening up and reading about Jesus and his life and his teachings? Do your kids see you memorizing Scripture? Praying?

Finally...I just want to finish with something really neat about this phrase.

It's a clear statement that...

3. The influence of sin is limited, but God's love is limitless.

Yes, God punishes...and how He does, we don't fully understand.

Yes, sin has consequences, of which God doesn't just eliminate.

Yes, when parents sin it negatively affects the children.

Yes, sin tends to run in the family.

But...notice it is limited **to the third and fourth generation.**

And did you catch this? God **maintains love to thousands.**

Part of the purpose of this statement is to draw a distinct contrast between the limited effects of sin and the limitless and transformative nature of God's love.

(Cassuto)

The Midrash, which is like the earliest commentary by Jewish scholars explaining this passage in Exodus, says this...

...this means that God's inclination to love and be merciful is at least 500 times greater than his inclination to punish...

Another Rabbi explains it this way...**'Even if 999 angels argue against a person, and a single angel argues in his favor, the Holy One, inclines the scales in favor of the one.'** And that is not the end of the matter...even if 999 aspects of the argument of that single angel argue against a man, but a single aspect of his case of that single angel argues in favor, the Holy One, inclines the scales in favor of the accused.'

Do you get it? God is eager to forgive.

Imagine a scale. On one side is God's mercy and forgiveness. On the other side is punishment and wrath. God's mercy comes in thousands, his punishment to just 3 or 4.

However we go about dealing with the uncomfortable nature of punishment, let's keep it within the scale that God Himself uses. Let me sum it up for you...

You may have heard of the name **Karl Barth (PIC OF BARTH)**, who is considered one of the greatest theological scholars of the 20th century, brilliant mind. There's a legendary story about Barth, that he was giving a lecture at the University of Chicago in 1962.

After his lecture, during a time of Q & A, a student asked Barth if he could summarize his whole life's work in theology in a sentence. Books, lectures, seminars, degrees...sum it up. Barth allegedly said, "Yes, I can. In the words of a song I learned as a little child: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

Perhaps the most profound words we can think on, the heart, the core of who God is.
Jesus love me this I know! Jesus loves me this I know!

Moses came to God wondering what's in a name? "God can you summarize your whole life's theology, your heart, your core identity, in a sentence for me?"

God didn't respond with big theology words, instead I believe the essence of his response to Moses was:

Yes I can. Jesus loves you Moses. I love you to death (**PIC OF JESUS ON CROSS**)!
One day I'll prove it without a doubt.

"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, 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 to the third and fourth generation."