

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Goodness and Mercy*

SERIES: *Psalm 23*

SCRIPTURES: *Psalm 23:5-6*

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**Credit to...Dallas Willard, Scott Scruggs, W. Phillip Keller, Henri Nouen*

Well good morning, it so great to worship with you. Want to say welcome to all of you in this room and to those of you gathered on-line, at home, tuning in to the live stream.

A big thank you to Chris and the Children's ministry and Dustin and the worship team for their participation today as we celebrate and think about Palm Sunday. That week before Easter, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. And crowds of people gathered waving palm branches to celebrate his arrival. That same week Jesus also sat around a table and shared a meal with his followers, the very first communion meal. And we'll be doing that later this morning as well.

But first we want to talk about another table image in Scripture as we finish up our series on Psalm 23 (**SERIES GRAPHIC**). It's found in the heart of this Psalm that we have been studying.

And I'll just warn you this is a really challenging table image to fully comprehend. Sometimes people will say, *"I like when you step on our toes."* And we try to present messages at Five Forks that step on toes and challenge us. But for me this table image and where it points us kind of crushes my toes. And I'd like some company!

Mark Twain once remarked, **“It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.”**

So let's talk for a few minutes about...

I. Tables and enemies?

If you have a Bible head to [Psalm 23:5](#) - **You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...**

One of the reasons this Psalm is so well known is because it deals with some of the greatest fears of human life. Does anyone care about me? Will we have enough? How do I know which path in life to take? Where do I turn when bad things happen? In each case, speaking to the frailty and dependency of we human beings and our reliance on God. That's what we've been talking about the last few weeks.

Verse 5 speaks to another one of those great fears of the human life. **What about enemies and evil? Will I be safe?**

And once again the call of Psalm 23 is to trust the Shepherd even in the very presence of my enemies, when my life is on the line. Do I trust Him and His way? That's what this section is about.

Ok, so first I wanna make this really practical, because it's easy to have this conversation in generic terms, but I want us to really wrestle with this today. Anyone have enemies? No, you don't need to shout out names, but let's be real with ourselves.

It could be on a personal level. Like, I'm a big UNC fan...enemies are those people who root for Duke Blue Devils. And I'll just point this out Tar heels vs. Blue Devils who do you think God roots for in that one? That person who just knows how to

frustrate you. The **co-worker** who doesn't carry their weight. The **family member** who always leaves a mess or changes the thermostat. The **neighbor** who blares their music for the entire neighborhood to hear.

We could also think of enemies on a larger scale. A **group of people** with whom you disagree over a certain point of view or way of life. People of a different **religion**? People with different **political views**? People with different views on issues of "**race and justice**"? People with different views on "**climate control**"? People with different views on **human sexuality**? I warned you this is not gonna be easy.

Or you may even think of enemies on a national level. Those nations that we are at odds with. Maybe...**Iraq** or **China** or **North Korea** come to mind.

Now, notice what the Psalm says...**you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.**

The imagery first of all speaks to the level of **trust and confidence** in God to protect me in the face of my enemies. That in the very presence of those who may be trying to destroy me or tear me down, in the war zone, God prepares a meal. I simply sit down to eat.

I think many times when people think about this phrase, in Psalm 23 they think about it as a victory meal after defeating one's enemies in battle. We would rather the verse said, "**I am going to prepare a table for you and me and I'm gonna smoke your enemies!**" I want a table in your presence God and I want you to wipe all of my enemies out! Once we have the upper hand and my enemies are no longer a threat then I can sit down and eat a meal in your presence. Then I'll be safe.

Our world sadly does not have a good answer for dealing with enemies. We try to destroy them. Kill them. Fight them. Defeat them. Because we are afraid of our

enemies. We're afraid they're going to take advantage of us. Kill us. Fight us. Defeat us.

But instead the image presented here is of the table in the presence of our enemies not because we have beaten them down and are now in control but instead because God is in control.

Do you see the difference? We want God to eliminate our fear, our pain, our difficult circumstance. But instead He wants us to trust Him, even in the greatest threats to our lives. "What if my enemy were to take my life?" Do you trust him with life itself?

I think there are too many of us who have put our ultimate sense of security and safety in something other than God and his way when it comes to our enemies.

There's actually a fascinating story in your Bible about this. Do you remember the story of **Gideon**? Anyone remember how many soldiers Gideon starts with? He starts with **32,000 soldiers**. God tells Gideon to defeat the Midianites. But before he can go into battle, God says, "*You have too many men. Too many weapons. Get rid of some.*" And God whittles his army down to how many? **300 soldiers**. It actually seems very irresponsible, doesn't it? Why would God do this? God says, "*I want you to know that your safety and security are not dependent on yourself, your intelligence, your might, your power. When you do you have put your faith in the wrong thing.*"

I think there are too many of us, who have done this exact same thing. We have put our faith in the 32,000 soldiers and our bigger weapons.

So there is something here in Psalm 23 about trusting God even in the face of the greatest threat to our very lives. And then second, I think there is something more here in Psalm 23 pointing to the relationship between "tables and enemies" that is ultimately fulfilled in the example set for us by Jesus.

Notice, he doesn't say, "Make sure you arm yourselves for battle", instead he says, "In the face of your enemies have a meal." There is something here pointing us to "the way" in which we followers of Jesus interact with evil and enemies that I believe is fulfilled in the Good Shepherd, Jesus and the tables he shared with his enemies.

There's the table with Zacchaeus that tax collector. The table in home of Simon the Pharisee. There's the meal with Peter on the beach after Peter denies knowing him. It happens so often...

Matthew 9 - When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

And then of course is the meal in **Matthew 26**, a story more familiar to many of us...Jesus sits at a table with his disciples to share the Last Supper. ²¹ **And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."** ²³ **Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."**

It's fascinating isn't it, that Jesus would actually eat a meal in the very presence of the one was about to betray him to the cross. We might even say that at the Last Supper, Jesus invites his enemy to the table.

Some of you may be familiar with the name Shane Claiborne. He's a young man who is part of an inner-city church in Philadelphia called the Simple Way, he's also a speaker and author. I've been reading a book of his recently called "The Irresistible Revolution". He speaks of an experience back in the early 2000's, he had when he was serving in Baghdad during the war:

That night in Baghdad, I read Psalm 23. It's the one folks usually read at funerals: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." And I felt like I was. But I noticed something I have never noticed before. The psalm says

that a table is prepared “in the presence of my enemies.” I remember thinking, why are our enemies there?

What if after we die, God brings our enemies to the table and asks them how we treated them? What if Jesus asks them, “Shane here claims to follow me. Did he love you? Did he feed you and pray for you like I taught him to?” What would our enemies say?

You see the table is not just a symbol of peace in the midst of and in front of our enemies...but as we turn and look at Jesus the table becomes a symbol of healing, forgiveness, and restoration with our enemies.

On one occasion Jesus was very blunt about this. In his only recorded sermon. Sermon the Mount. ⁴³ **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor^[1] and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**

This is a hard concept to swallow. “Loving our enemies...dipping our bread in the same bowl as our betrayer...” In fact, many people today would question the validity and practicality of this idea. It doesn’t seem practical to deal with evil and enemies by loving them.

Maybe Jesus didn’t really mean what he said. Maybe Jesus wasn’t fully aware of the kinds of danger we would face in our world when he made this statement. Though, it’s always good to be reminded, for practicalities sake, that Jesus happened to live in a time when his enemies were known for crucifying people. He was familiar with exactly what evil and enemies may do to you if you, if you choose to love them. They might hang on you on a cross.

But the question is not what seems practical to us and what doesn't, what works and what doesn't, the deeper question is what is faithful to Jesus? When it comes dealing with our enemies, what is it that looks like Jesus?

We don't love enemies because it works. We do it because we follow Jesus. There may be lots of things in this world that seem more productive or effective or responsible but productive and effectiveness are not our driving motivation in life. Jesus is. And when our world looks at our crucified Messiah on a cross they say, "that's foolishness." Jesus actually said, **"If anyone would be my disciple, he must take up his cross and follow me."** Don't be surprised if in following Jesus, you end up on a cross. I told you this is a hard one for me.

I recently came across a statement by Soren Kierkegaard that hit me between the eyes...he once wrote.

“The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any words in the New Testament and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world?”

When we live in the reality of Psalm 23, we are able to sit confidently at the table even in the presence of our enemies...and if Jesus were there, he may encourage us to invite them to the table with us. And hang onto that idea, because we'll come back to that at the end of the message.

Ok, let's finish up. Last verse and a half of Psalm 23...

II. Finishing up

The final verses, I think point to that kind of life that is possible when you allow God to be your shepherd and walk in his way even in the midst of the greatest fears our world can throw at us.

Words that I love to say. Words that I love to think about. Words that if I could truly live my life as if they were real would transform everything.

You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows...

Now anointing in the ancient world was a way of extending a blessing or special favor towards someone. It was to choose someone as significant.

David is perhaps recalling his own anointing as King of Israel...and presents us with an image of being chosen.

God had told the prophet Samuel... **“Fill your horn with oil...I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.”**

¹⁰ Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, “The LORD has not chosen these.” ¹¹ So he asked Jesse, “Are these all the sons you have?”

“There is still the youngest,” Jesse answered. “He is tending the sheep.” Samuel said, “Send for him...”

¹² So he sent for him and had him brought in...Then the LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; this is the one.”

I think that part of the idea here in Psalm 23 is that *“We are chosen”...blessed...by God. Not, “hey I am chosen and you aren’t na-na-na-na-na-na.”* Also not, *“I’m chosen making me better or more valuable than you.”* Simply, *“I am chosen by God. And you*

can be too if you will live in the reality of Psalm 23.” We can all experience “chosenness anointing” by God.

One of the essential human needs is acceptance. Knowing that you are accepted not because of something you have done, not because you have earned it, not because you have measured up but simply accepted...loved as you are.

So often our world sends the opposite message. You are not good enough. You are worthless. You are despicable. You are ugly. You are nobody – unless you can demonstrate otherwise. And these negative voices are so loud and persistent that we soon start to believe them. And we live our lives trying to prove our worth to the world.

Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the “Beloved.” Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence. (Nouen 33)

Psalm 23 says, *You are the anointed. The guest of honor. You are chosen. You are beautiful. You are admirable. You are loved!* God delights in you.

I may have shared this story before, but I was reading a story about a Dad who was at the store with his two-year old son. His son was not having a good day. Disobedient and disagreeable...fussing, crying, and whining. The frustrated father tried everything to quiet his son, but nothing seemed to help. If you're a parent you try almost anything in these situations. (Threatening consequences, raising your voice, the stare down, even bribery if that's what it takes.)

But this two-year old son simply would not obey. Then, under some special inspiration, the Father tried something else. He scooped up his son and holding him close to his chest, began singing an impromptu love song. None of the words rhymed. He sang off key. And yet as best he could, this daddy began sharing his

heart with his beloved son. *“I love you.”* He sang. *“I’m so glad you’re my little boy. You make me happy. I like the way you laugh.”* On they went from one store to the next. Quietly the father continued singing off key and making up words and as he did the little boy began to relax and became still, listening to the strange and wonderful song. Comforted by his father’s voice. Resting against his daddy’s chest.

Finally they finished shopping and went to the car. As the father opened the door and prepared to buckle his son in the car seat, the boy lifted his head and said, *“Sing it to me again, Daddy. Sing it to me again!”* He was saying, *“Daddy, just remind me of how much you love me.”*

And I kind of like to think that’s the image behind Psalm 23:5...you anoint my head with oil...you have chosen me, as your special one. When I quote Psalm 23, I’m saying *“Daddy, remind me again how much you love me!”*

And you see, knowing we are chosen and blessed by God leads to **a pervasive sense of joy** and contentment in our lives. **Psalm 23** says, **“My cup overflows...”**

Oil of anointing is associated in the Bible with joy. The prophet Isaiah...

Isaiah 61...many of you will be familiar with these words - **The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...listen to what Isaiah goes on to say in verse 3... to bestow on them a crown of beauty, instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.**

When you embrace God’s love in your life, you begin to overflow with joy. Maybe you need to soak in God’s anointing this week. Allow him to choose you. And as you do, may His joy overflow in you. (I’ve put some of my favorite scriptures in the bulletin. Read those passage this week and soak it in.)

And if you're living in the reality of God's anointing and his joy...then would you do me a favor and share that with someone in your world this week?

Someone in your life needs to know they are loved, accepted, chosen. I love you. I'm so proud of you. We're so glad you're a part of our family. Our team.

Let's allow this invitation from Psalm 23 to overflow. We are anointed, chosen, loved!

But more than that, look at this final phrase...as we soak in God's anointing...

Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Two things I find encouraging about this closing verse...

Notice goodness and mercy come from God. This is why we're not simply talking about self-help techniques. We're talking about relying on God and allowing his goodness and mercy to come into our lives.

On my own I will not attain goodness and mercy. I will not be gracious. I will not experience sufficiency. I will not invite my enemies to the table. I need the goodness and mercy of God in my life.

We don't need to try and fake it, or "pretend in" goodness and mercy, we need to rely on the Good Shepherd.

And then finally notice this also...

Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life

I've been encouraging you to compare and contrast other versions...The Message version translates this section as...

Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life.

I love that image. Sometimes when I think of God's love follow's me, it makes think, he kind of does it begrudgingly because he has too or something. But I love the image of God's love is chasing after me. It reminds me that he wants what is best for me...he takes delight in loving me and showering me with goodness and mercy.

The Apostle Paul in his great theological treatise, the book of Romans, actually places God's pursuing love right at the center of his argument (Romans 8)...

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

**“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”**

(Does some of this language remind you, of what we have been studying in Psalm 23. Even though I walk through the darkest valley...what is that gets us through?)

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors...through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is what it means to dwell in God's house. This is why we need not fear insufficiency in our lives. We need not fear confusion. We need not fear doubt. We need not fear enemies or even death itself. Because even death does not separate us from God's love.

Jesus said, **“I am going to prepare a place for you and if I go and prepare a place for you I will come and take you to be with me...”**

There is place where contentment and joy, peace and security can be yours. It's in the presence of the Good Shepherd and you can live your life, starting right here, right now in that reality. That's the invitation offered by Psalm 23.

The 23rd Psalm is not merely a pretty poem with charming sentiments but an accurate description of the kind of life that is available to anyone who will allow God to be their Shepherd.”

PRAY -

COMMUNION Transition:

As we close our service today we want to share in communion with one another. The words of Psalm 23 weren't written about communion but they certainly resonate.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies...Communion is about a table that was shared between Jesus, his disciples and including Judas (his enemy) the one who was about to betray him to his death. But on that night, around that table, Jesus knelt down before his enemy and washed his feet and he broke bread and drank juice with Judas. This is a table of reconciliation, grace, humility and extravagant/underserving love.

More than that, the table is also an invitation for us. We too, because of our sin, because of our pride, and greed and deceit are enemies of Christ. And in communion we are invited to sit at his table and experience his grace, forgiveness and love.

We want to remember that today.

If you would please stand and we're going to read this prayer together. When we are done reading you can begin entering the two side center aisle's walk down front...take bread and eat, juice and drink then make your way back to your seat.

"Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us; that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways, to the glory of your Name. Amen"