

X Marks The Spot

³*Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.*
(Jude 1:3. ESV)

¹⁷*I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.* (Romans 16:17. ESV)

¹*But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.* (Titus 2:1. ESV)

Justice And Mercy
January 13th, 2013
Deuteronomy 32:4
Exodus 33:19
Romans 9:13-18
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Last week we began a new series called “X-Marks The Spot”. We are going to spend 14 Sundays dealing with some of the seeming tensions that exist within the immensity of Almighty God that often spill out into his interactions with human beings. Last Sunday we dealt with perhaps the biggest tension of them all: the tension between the Sovereignty of God and the responsibility of mankind. This week we are dealing with the seeming tension between the justice of God and the mercy of God. Let’s begin by looking at perhaps the most comprehensive definition of God’s justice in all of Holy Scripture. Open your Bibles to Deuteronomy 32:4. On the day that Moses died, after having preached to the people of God one last time he recited the words of a song that he had written to help the Israelites remember the character of God. He begins his description with a definition of God’s justice:

The Justice Of God

³ For I will proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God!

⁴ “The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are **justice**. A God of **faithfulness** and **without iniquity, just** and **upright** is he. (Deuteronomy 32:4. ESV)

Moses uses five different words to define God’s justice the first word is *mishpat* and it is the most common word in the OT behind our English translation of “justice”. The old KJV rendered it

here as “judgment” and that is not wrong it just sounds funny to say that all his ways are judgment, but that is pretty close to what the word means. It means a formal sentence, it means correct, legal discernment. The Judge of the Earth gets it right every time; that’s what Moses is saying with this first word.

The second word is *emunah* and it means “firmness” or “veracity” or “truthfulness”. God is firm, there is no denying that, but he is firm with respect to truth.

The third word Moses uses here is negated, he says that God is without *evel* which means “perverseness” or “iniquity”. There is nothing twisted in God, nothing unclean, nothing unwholesome. God is altogether without those things.

Fourthly, Moses says that God is *tsaddiyq* which means “just” or “righteous”. It is sometimes said that if there is a difference between *mishpat* and *tsaddiyq*, and they are very similar terms, but if there is a difference it is that *tsaddiyq* refers to the outworking of that which is inherently just. It has more of an external force. There is a just judgement and then there is the execution of that or there is a living in light of that. God is internally and externally just. He is just in himself and he is just in all his dealings we might say.

Lastly Moses says that God is *yashar* which means “straight” or “upright”. We might say today that God is “straight up”. He isn’t playing games, he isn’t saying one thing but doing another. He isn’t hiding things from us in order to sting us. God plays it straight up. He puts the cards on the table and he doesn’t change the rules midway through the game. God is just.

The classic narrative presentation of God’s justice is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. We don’t have time to read that whole story but the story illustrates all of these principles. There is a formal judgment in that story. At the end of the story God renders a judgment and he destroys the city. He makes a decision and he executes it with firmness. But that firmness is executed only after the truth has been established. You remember that he sent angels to investigate. They had to build a case and gather evidence. God played it straight up, they were not held accountable to rules that they were unaware of, in fact the story is presented as a violation of the most obvious laws in all of nature. Homosexual intercourse is presented in the Bible as the most flagrant and obvious violation of natural law that can be imagined – so these folks were not

judged on the basis of obscure standards they were unaware of, they were judged on straight up, universally understood standards and only after investigation and suitable inquiry. God is just. He also did no evil in doing justice. He investigated whether there were righteous people there, he found them and removed them before the sentence was executed. God is just and he does no evil in doing justice.

Now sometimes people will say “yes God was just in the Old Testament but not so in the New Testament” – well I trust you know by now how galactically ignorant such sayings are but nevertheless we’ll quickly take inventory of one New Testament passage just to assure ourselves that God does not and cannot change in his essential nature. Look at Revelation 20:11.

¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20:11-15. ESV)

This passage is no different in terms of what it reveals about God’s character than Deuteronomy 32 or for that matter Genesis 18-19. God executes judgment. He is quite firm in his judgments yet only with respect to truth. Truth is established by means of evidence before sentence is given and proceeds on the basis of universally applied standards. God is straight up and does right in all his judgments. Old Testament and New this is fundamental to the nature of Almighty God. God is just.

And yet, the Bible affirms with equal stridency and consistency that God is merciful.

The Mercy Of God

Turn in your Bibles to Exodus 33:19. In this famous account Moses has asked for a more full and intimate disclosure of the Divine Character of God and the Lord replies by saying:

“I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (Exodus 33:19. ESV)

As the story goes on God says that Moses cannot “see his face” – that is see all of who God is – or he would die, but God is content we are told to show Moses the substance of his beauty. John Calvin preferred to translate the Hebrew *toob* as “beauty” rather than “goodness” and I think he is probably right. I think God is saying to Moses: “You can’t see all of who I am – that would literally blow your mind, but I will reveal to you the substance of my beauty” and then he says these very surprising words: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy”.

The substance of God’s beauty is his inclination to bestow grace and mercy. That’s his goodness. The Hebrew word used here for “mercy” is *rakham* and it means “compassion”, “mercy”, “love” or “pity”. A.W. Tozer defines mercy this way: “mercy is the goodness of God confronting human suffering and guilt”.¹ Sometimes you hear it said that grace is what God gives and mercy is what God doesn’t give – meaning punishment – but I’ve never really liked that definition because it makes mercy sound passive as though mercy is merely the absence of justice and that is to fall prey to the idea that these two truths are irreconcilable – that God can only be merciful if he stops being just and that is simply not what the Bible says. Tozer had it right. Mercy is the goodness of God confronting human suffering and guilt. That is a definition of God’s mercy that sees it partnering with God’s justice. People are still sinful, people are still guilty but God meets that with something beautiful.

Now we’ve already said that we mustn’t fall prey to the popular nonsense that God was just in the Old Testament and he is merciful in the New – that is literally a heresy, meaning it isn’t just something that irritates me, it is an actual heresy, despite the fact that people in the Biblically illiterate North American Evangelical church say that all the time. It is a heresy. It is wrong. God does not and indeed cannot change. God introduces himself as merciful in the Old Testament – in fact the Old Testament speaks about the mercy of God four times as often as the New Testament² - and when Paul defines God’s mercy in the New Testament he does it using the Old Testament definition. Look at Romans 9:13ff:

¹³As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

¹ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge Of The Holy*; p. 91.

² *Ibid.*; p. 91.

¹⁴What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Romans 9:13-16. ESV)

The New Testament isn't different, it is more. The New Testament takes us deeper into the truth of God it does not take us in new directions. Moses told us that God is merciful and Paul takes us even deeper into that mysterious truth. Here is what Moses and Paul are trying to get at with their presentation of God's mercy.

First of all both Moses and Paul affirm that God's mercy is particular. It doesn't say: "I will show mercy on everyone", it says "I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy". God's mercy is particular. "Jacob have I loved but Esau I hated". This takes us back to God's Sovereignty and election doesn't it? These immensities are all related to one another. God's character is in harmony with itself and so as we poke and prod at one immensity we find ourselves dealing simultaneously with other immensities. God is particular and electing in his working of mercy. Romans 9 goes on to say:

¹⁸So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. (Romans 9:18. ESV)

The decision of God to withhold mercy from some is unapologetically presented by Paul as what it is: the decision to harden. Paul doesn't use wimpy language. He understands that when a Sovereign God withholds mercy from a person that he effectively decrees that they will carry on in their course of rebellion; deeper into hardness and further into darkness. God is particular in his working of mercy.

And yet Paul and Moses also affirm that God is never unjust in his working of mercy. God's mercy is particular, it is electing but also it is just. We agreed last week that there are things in God we are not told and this is one of them. There is a justice to God's electing mercy but the justice of that election resides inside God – not inside us, therefore Paul says elsewhere, where is boasting? Without telling us how exactly, the Bible tells us that the particular mercy of God is in no way inconsistent with his justice and therefore these characteristics should never be presented as antagonistic - as though God must choose on a case by case basis whether to be just or merciful. The Bible says that he is both simultaneously in everything he does. When God is merciful you can bet that he is being merciful in a just way – whether you understand that or not,

it is so. Not knowing HOW God's mercy is just does not mean that it is not just – it just means that there are things God hasn't told us. What we are told is that God's mercy is particular and just. We are also told that it is active and condescending.

The classic illustration of God's mercy in the Bible is the story of the Good Samaritan. I've told you before that the early church consistently taught that the Good Samaritan story, while of course it was an encouragement to merciful behaviour was primarily meant to illustrate how God himself was merciful towards us in the person of Jesus Christ. We were dead and helpless on the side of the road. The religious leaders of the day passed us by and did not help us. Jesus came to find us – the active mercy of God in human flesh – he found us on the side of the road, picked us up, bound our wounds, poured the oil of his own blood upon our infirmities and placed us in a healing community – the church, all at great price to himself. This is the one, the story concludes, who shows us mercy. The mercy of God is particular, it is just and it is active and condescending. This indeed is the beauty of God.

Exploring The (Seeming) Tension Between God's Justice And Mercy

Well, how in the world do these things fit together? The Apostle Paul anticipates that question; in Romans 9, he says:

¹⁴What shall we say then? **Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!** ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. (Romans 9:13-16. ESV)

Let's unpack how the Apostle Paul understands the mercy and justice of God relating to each other. First of all Paul says that God's mercy and justice are not antagonistic – they are overlapping, complementary and harmonious. God's justice is merciful and his mercy is just. That is the testimony of the Bible but let's try and tease that out so that we can grapple with it. In what sense can we understand the justice of God as itself merciful? Let's consider that in the context of the Sodom and Gomorrah narrative. There was gross and explicit sin happening there that was destroying the very fabric of society. Would it have been a kindness for God to allow that to grow unchecked? One thing we know about sin is that it is contagious. Once a certain sin reaches a level of cultural saturation it is normalized and once it is normalized it is routinized and once it is routinized it becomes glorified such that at the end of the process people not only do

evil but they applaud others who do the same and censor those who do not do the same. When God intervenes in that process with judgment it is a mercy to the rest of humanity. Think about this from an eternal perspective. Remember that sin is contagious – it is like a virus. Would you want God to be merciful to Nazism? Do you want Nazis in heaven? I don't. Well do you want pride in heaven? What about lust? What about greed? I don't want any of those things in heaven because those things are all corrosive and contagious and heaven would be hell within 3 generations. Therefore, God's justice on sin in particular is mercy upon humanity in general. God's justice is merciful, but how is his mercy just?

That of course is the great dilemma in the Bible. People in Bible days were not sure how to hold these things together but unlike us they were more likely to abandon the truth of God's mercy in order to embrace the reality of his justice. They would quote verses like Exodus 23:7 where God himself says:

⁷Keep yourself far from a false matter; do not kill the innocent and righteous. **For I will not justify the wicked.** (Exodus 23:7. NRSV)

Here God unambiguously says that guilt has to be punished. He will not just wave his hand at sin willy nilly. It was verses like this that left people scratching their heads over God's mercy. If God is just and sin must be punished and he will not simply wave it away then..... how exactly will God show mercy on whom he will show mercy? That remains a mystery in the Old Testament. It was something that had to be taken on faith. God would find a way to show mercy without denigrating or compromising his own justice but rather in a way that was itself just. But how? In the New Testament the cross of Jesus Christ is presented as the great and long awaited answer to that question. The Apostle Paul says in his classic presentation of the Holy centre of the Gospel:

²¹But now **the righteousness of God** has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³for **all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are **justified by his grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. **This was to show God's righteousness**, because **in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins**. ²⁶It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so **that he might be just and the justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26. ESV)

This is where these supposed tensions are revealed to be nothing of the sort – you simply had to wait and you eventually see how God can be simultaneously merciful and just – more than that you see the justice of his mercy and the mercy of his justice! These are part and parcel of the same, unified BEAUTY of the Lord God Yahweh! On the cross of Jesus Christ God shows his justice – he pays a precise and particular price for the sins of his own people. God does not merely wave his hand at sin. It has to be paid for and indeed it is. In his body on the cross Jesus Christ bears the sin of God’s children. Every sin is paid for. Justice is done. It is finished. This is the justice of God’s mercy who had passed over former sins. When God’s people formerly had sinned and yet had still experienced God’s kindness the question was asked: “How is this happening?” The prophets had figured out that the animal sacrifices were not to be credited with securing God’s kindness. They must be pointing forward to something, but to what? Isaiah the prophet came closest to the fullness of this truth when he said; looking forward:

⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5. ESV)

Isaiah foresaw a suffering servant sent from God who would pay the price of our promised peace. He foresaw the justice of God’s mercy. God would be merciful to his people but it would not be cheap mercy, it would not be a mercy at the expense of his justice it would be Godly mercy, it would be JUST mercy. And so it was. And now because of God’s just mercy we can be forgiven and we can enjoy an eternity with God commended into his care by both his justice AND his mercy. Look at 1 John 1:9 and consider carefully what John is saying:

⁹If we confess our sins, **he is faithful and just to forgive** us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9. ESV)

Notice that he doesn’t say: “he is faithful and merciful to forgive us our sins”; that is what you would expect but that is not what he says because that is not the point he is trying to make. John is trying to show that if you are in Jesus Christ by faith, then your sins have been paid for in his own body on the cross and it would therefore be an injustice on the part of God to punish you again in eternity for those same sins. You can’t punish the same sins twice. In our own legal system we have that same provision – double jeopardy – you can’t go to jail twice for the same crime. And so John is saying if you are in Christ through faith – if you have confessed your sins to Jesus and embraced him as the punishment of your peace and as your Lord and Saviour then

God's own JUSTICE demands that you be acquitted and welcomed into glory on the last day. Do you understand that my friend? If you are in Christ it is not only God's mercy that will welcome you on that day, it is also his justice. God's justice and mercy always work together; they are friends and co-labourers on our behalf.

Children Of Our Father

Well, we cannot leave this topic without asking how we should live as children of so great a Father. If this is who God is and we are his children by means of the justice and mercy of the cross, how then shall we live? Let me briefly suggest just the beginnings of a potential list.

1. Love the law

I think the thing that breaks my heart the most about how people talk about God and about his Word today is this idea that to embrace God's mercy is to despise God's law. That is to surrender wholesale to the absurdity of the supposed antagonism between God's justice and mercy. That is to treat God's mercy as though it is some sort of universal acid that eats away and destroys everything else the Bible says about God's character. When we talk like that we declare that we despise God's holiness in an attempt to love his mercy. But God loves all of who he is. As a very crass analogy if you wanted to show me how much you loved and appreciated my wife and you thought the best way to do that was to punch all my kids in the face I would not welcome your declaration of friendship and affection. If to love my wife you have to hate my kids I don't want to be your friend. And if you think that you honour God by loving his mercy by despising the rightness of his ways as expressed in his law, then you are a fool and you are a hater of God and that grieves me deeply. Nothing in God need be embraced at the expense of anything else. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. He takes us deeper into what it reveals about God, he never takes us away. If you want to be a child of your Father, learn to love his mercy AND his law, because they are one and the same.

2. Seek and strive for equity

Listen friends, you've heard me say many critical things about North American Evangelicalism and I stand by those things. Evangelicalism in our lifetime is at a low water mark. We need a

Reformation as much today as in Luther's day. And yet there are some bright lights out there and it would uncharitable of us to not acknowledge and celebrate them. Last week in Atlanta 60,000 Evangelical young adults gathered for the Passion conference pledging in their lifetime to put an end to human slavery. There are more slaves on planet earth today than at any time previous in human history – did you know that? And once again it is Evangelicals that are leading the charge for social equity. If you know anything about history than you know that it was Evangelical Christians who eradicated slavery in Great Britain – chiefly William Wilberforce – and in North America. It was abolitionist preachers who stirred up Americans to free the slaves and any honest historian will acknowledge that. The Bible says that God created all people in his own image and that all people share in that dignity EQUALLY and are entitled to equal treatment under the law and it has been Bible believing Christians that have acted upon that and brought revolutionary change in country after country and we are seeing it again in our day. 60,000 young adults – mostly College kids, raised over 3 million dollars last week alone for the cause of human equity. To be a child of our Father who is in all that he does JUST and MERCIFUL is to actively seek equity and it is to reach out in mercy to confront and address situations of human suffering.

3. Tell the truth about sin and judgment

The only fear I have about the fresh surge of mercy ministry and justice seeking among young Evangelicals is that often over the course of history we have developed an addiction to the praise that comes from the world for these sorts of efforts. Mercy and justice ministries are the only thing the world likes about us – and so it is very easy to emphasize those things to the eventual exclusion of our primary duty to be proclaimers of the truth. God plays it straight up and we are told to do the same. We are not permitted as children of our Father to just dig a well somewhere and walk away. Those people need to know about heaven and hell and what means God has provided for their justification. We cannot erase hell – that is not a kindness to people who will face a firm God and the faithful record of their own sins. We need to tell the truth, the whole truth and not be silenced by the praise of the world upon our acts of mercy and justice.

4. Lift high the cross of Jesus

I've left the most obvious and most important response to the end. Obviously the most important way we respond to our own experience of the justice and mercy of God as demonstrated upon the cross of Jesus Christ is to lift high that cross for all to see. Jesus said in John 12:

³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32. ESV)

Just as Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the desert, so we must lift high the cross of Jesus Christ in our preaching to a sick and dying world. This is the means by which God has decreed that justice and mercy would go forth. It is a means that by design excludes the proud and the self assured and that favours the humble and those who tremble at his word. God will show mercy to whom he will show mercy and indeed the Judge of All Things will do right. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.