

The Good and Beautiful God: God is self-Sacrificing

June 12, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Phil. 2:5-11

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

*⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

*⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

*⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

*⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

*¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

I remember speaking to a member of one of the churches I have served about why her son no longer attended church. Her son could not understand why God allowed his Son Jesus to die on the cross. For her son that was the ultimate in parental neglect since, in his opinion, God could have intervened at any time and prevented Jesus from having to suffer and die upon the cross. Seen from this perspective I could appreciate her son's reticence to going to church and even his repugnance to the thought of worshipping a God who behaved in such a way. Her son's perspective is not as uncommon as you might think. However, it makes some mistaken presumptions about God the Father, God the Son, and what really happened on that cross.

First, we have to have an understanding of God as the triune God. Today is Trinity Sunday, so this is a very appropriate topic for the day. The concept of the Trinity is difficult for people to understand. Our God is three Persons, one God. St. Patrick used a three-leafed shamrock to illustrate how one plant, the clover, could have three leaves and yet still be considered as one. Some people have used the image of water being as one yet able to be experienced as solid, liquid, and gas, all at the same time. One of my

favorite illustrations was used by a Christian comedian. He said if you were to take a cherry pie, cut it into three pieces, the filling still all ran together as one but you could separate it into three different pieces of pie. Maybe that was my favorite because I like cherry pie. At any rate, in order to understand what happened on the cross, we need to begin with an understanding of the Trinity.

You see. God the Father and God the Son are the same God, different persons. It's not that God the Father sent God the Son to the cross to die. It's that God Himself sacrificed God's self on the cross. Of course, the next question is why did God do that? Did he have to do that?

[As noted previously] we live in a performance-based world. We get what we have earned [so we believe]. All of the world's great religions (except Christianity) are based on the same principle. Humans must do something in order to obtain the favor and blessing of their god(s), either through worship, sacrifice, right living or all of the above. This seems logical when we reason from our own experience. The world we live in works this way (we tend to think): do good things, good things happen; do bad things, bad things happen. In Hinduism and Buddhism this is karma. Order your life properly, follow the precepts, offer the proper sacrifices, and God will reward you with blessing. Finding God is largely up to you. This is not only logical [to some people], it is also appealing because it allows us to remain in control.¹

For many people that may seem reasonable, but when you think about it, sometimes bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. I have talked about that in previous sermons, so I am not going to repeat all that here. The point is that we cannot save ourselves from ourselves. We are not the ones in control, although there are times we may think that way. Back to the question: Why did God have to go to the cross? The answer in brief is that it is because we could not save ourselves from the predicament we placed ourselves in.

Human beings, from the days of Adam and Eve, were given the choice to do either right or wrong. Our human nature is to do the very things we know we ought not to do. "We are corrupt and depraved. It is like a disease that cannot be cured by willpower or knowledge."² Some may wonder why God didn't just forgive Adam and Eve on the spot, right then and there, but God could not go back on his commandment. There had to be consequences for disobeying his commandment. Humankind became corrupted and there was nothing we could do to reverse the transgression. Sin and misbehavior became ingrained in our very nature. How could we consider our God to be a good God

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, pp. 134-135.

² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

and yet still allow sin to run rampant in this world? What was the solution for this dilemma?

Since we could not save ourselves, God Himself came in the form of a human being.

Jesus took on a body like our own because human bodies were liable to the corruption of death. He surrendered his body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This he did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death would thereby be abolished.³

Only a sacrifice without blemish would be sufficient to take on the sins of the whole world. Jesus, God made flesh, was the only one capable of doing that.

Jesus reverses the original Fall by doing for us what we could not do for ourselves! By the sacrifice of his own body Jesus did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way, and he made a new beginning of life for us, by giving us the hope of the resurrection. Jesus, you see, destroyed death.⁴

Jesus had to die to a very real, undeniable, public death that everyone could see. If there were no witness to His death, no one would believe His resurrection. He would be regarded as a teller of tales.

[People abhor the execution on the cross, as they should] But note this: a marvelous and mighty paradox has occurred, for the death which they thought to inflict on Him as dishonor and disgrace has become the glorious monument of death's defeat. Though they tried to kill Him in shame, the cross stands for all eternity as a symbol of the glory of God. And one final point, how could he have reached out to the entire world if He had not been crucified, *for it is only on the cross that a man dies with his arms outstretched?*⁵

God did this for us because he loves us, knowing that many people would not love Him in return. "Unrequited love might be the most painful of all human experiences. To love someone and not be loved in return is a deep hurt, an excruciating ache. God experienced the pain of unrequited love."⁶ Jesus said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Jesus even laid down his life for

³ Ibid., p. 137.

⁴ Ibid., p. 137.

⁵ Ibid., p. 138.

⁶ Ibid., p. 139.

those who were his enemies. He laid down his life for those who behave as though they could care less. Jesus laid down his life for you. What more could he have done for you?

Paul the apostle expressed the paradox of Jesus' self-sacrificing love for us in the poem I read to you from the letter to the Philippians.

That is the paradox of self-sacrifice: by emptying and humbling himself and becoming obedient [to His Father's will], Jesus was "highly exalted." When Jesus was asked who the greatest is in the kingdom of God, he replied, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:4). The greatest are those who serve. This narrative is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the kingdom of this world, where the greatest are those who are *served*.⁷

Jesus did not *have* to die. Jesus *chose* to die. The Father, Son and Spirit worked in harmony to reach out to a fallen and broken world in order to restore it. God did for us what we could never do for ourselves. The cross is a symbol of God's love and sacrifice. Jesus assumed and healed our human condition, and in doing so he demonstrated the depth of God's love for all of creation.⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 144.

⁸ Ibid., p. 145.