

The Good and Beautiful God: God is Holy

June 5, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

John 3:16-20, 35-36

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

... ³⁵ The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. ³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

John 3:16 is probably the most well-known verse of the Bible. It is often called the "gospel in miniature" and speaks about God's love. We may be taken aback, then, when we continue reading the chapter and have it end on the note about God's wrath: "...but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them." God's love and God's wrath, all in the same chapter? How is that even possible? We sometimes think of God's wrath as the opposite of God's love. And we may typically find people who believe it is either one or the other. Those who believe only in a God of wrath believe that God is out to get them. They believe that God is angry with them all the time about all the things they do wrong and God is just waiting for them to make a mistake big enough that he will punish them with a terrible crisis in their life. At the other extreme are those who believe only in a God of love and gentleness, a big teddy-bear kind of God who lets people do whatever they want and he will never correct them because he wants to be a loving friend rather than a disciplinary parent. They believe that God would never do anything that would make them be uncomfortable with what they choose to do with their lives. In reality, our God is a God of both love and wrath, because our God is a holy God.

"The narrative of a god who does not care about sin naturally undermines the entire Christian story. God demonstrates wrath toward sin; there is judgment in God's kingdom, and there is a need for Jesus to die on a cross.

"The teddy-bear god seems inviting at first. But when you look at our world or look deeply into your own heart, you see a darkness that is unmistakable. The nonwrathful

god is powerless against this darkness. As strange as it may sound, ...the wrath of God is a beautiful part of the majesty and love of God.”¹

The wrath of God is not like human wrath, which is reckless and irrational passion. For example, God is never described by Paul [the apostle] as being angry. Anger is a human emotion. Wrath is different. God’s wrath is a mindful, objective, rational response. It is actually an act of love. God is not indecisive when it comes to evil. God is fiercely and forcefully opposed to the things that destroy his precious people.

...Wrath is a necessary reaction of a loving and holy God, a good and beautiful God, to evil. God’s wrath is a *temporary and just verdict on sin and evil*. As J. I. Packer notes, “God’s wrath in the Bible is always judicial,” and is “a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil.”

Packer concludes his point by asking, “Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as he did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not act adversely to evil in this world be morally perfect? Surely not.” And if the Creator of the universe were this indifferent, would the universe be fair? One of the things we humans cannot escape is our longing for fairness and justice. [We] do not want a universe in which there is no justice, no right and wrong. And [we] do not want a God who is indifferent to moral evil.²

Hebrews 12:29 tells us that “our God is a consuming fire.” “Though we are now reconciled to Christ, God is not indifferent to [our] sin.” Our sin hurts us, and because it hurts us, it hurts God, because God loves us.

When you think about it, you don’t really want a teddy-bear kind of God in the long run. This god is like permissive parents who let their kids drink and do drugs and live promiscuous lives without guilt. Perhaps at one time, such parents might seem “cool,” but they really weren’t. They were actually lazy and didn’t really care what happened to their kids. Because those kids didn’t have direction or boundaries in their lives, they went on to do hard drugs, and most of them wrecked their lives before they were out of college. Those parents may be what you think you want when you are a teenager, but you really don’t. Because the momentary pain and restriction of disciplines is nothing compared to a lifetime of wasted resources and a wasted life.

I am sometimes asked if I actually believe in hell, as if a loving God would not send people to a place of torment. According to John chapter 3, God does not send people to hell. People *choose* to go to hell when they reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life,*

¹ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, pp. 116-117.

² *Ibid.*, p, 120-121.

for God's wrath remains on them (v. 36). You see, there are those who will spend eternity with God because they believe that God's will should be done. There are those who will spend eternity away from God – their choice – because they believe their will should be done, not God's. There are people who don't love God and who don't want to spend all of eternity with him. A loving God gives them that opportunity to choose – and to live with their consequences. Because, in my opinion, to spend eternity with all those people with each one believing it should be their will being done is the very definition of hell. Could you imagine, a multitude of people all screaming, "I want it done my way!" Reminds me of the scene in Disney's Little Mermaid where the seagulls are all standing around squawking, "Mine! Mine! Mine!" Good God, deliver us from such a fate!

God loves you. Have no doubt about that. But he loves you enough to not want you to live a life of destructive behavior. He designed you in his image, and to be healthy and whole in His name. Discipline is generally not appreciated at the time it is given. But a person who truly loves will love enough to know when to offer tough love, a loving corrective to help the person they love become all they were intended to be.

"God's first and last word is always grace. Until we have been assured that we are loved and forgiven, it is impossible to address our sinfulness correctly. We will operate out of our own resources, trying to get God to like us by our own efforts to change. God's first word is always grace... Only then can we begin to understand God's holiness, and ours."³

³ Ibid., p. 127.