

Nature and Character of God

What Is God Like?

August 18, 2019

I. What is God like?

A. Today, we are continuing our study of the nature and character of God.

1. Last Sunday, we looked at God's nature and character from the perspective of **Exodus 34:6-7**, which contains God's description of Himself to Moses.
2. **Exodus 34:6-7** . . . Then the Lord passed by in front of [Moses] and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; [7] who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."
3. God begins His self-description by stating His position – He's **the Lord** or the master. Then He states who He is – He's the **Lord God**, the supreme being, which means He is both the rightful and the all-powerful master who is able to free us from any enslaving power, and empower us to live the way He tells us to live.
 - a. The next things God says is that He is **compassionate**, that is, His normal inclination is that of pity or sympathy toward those who are suffering – even when their suffering is self-imposed.
 - b. But He is not just compassionate, He is also **gracious** – which is the natural expression or the logical response of compassion.
 - c. From there He says He is **slow to anger**, which means He does not allow anger to rule His decisions or His dealings with us.
 - d. Next God says He **abounds in lovingkindness**, which means He has an abundance of love driven tenderness, – and it is this love driven tenderness that restrains or softens His anger.
 - e. Along with abounding in lovingkindness, God says He **abounds in truth, or faithfulness**, depending on how you translate the Greek word used there. I said last Sunday that both truth and faithfulness fit the context.
 - f. Finally, God says **He forgives iniquity** (*gross depravity*), **transgression** (*breaking the law*), and **sin** (*knowing the right thing to do but not doing it*). And as I said last Sunday, without God's forgiveness, we would be lost even though He is

compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.

4. Today, we will finish looking at God's nature and character through God's self-description in **Exodus 34:6-7**.

B. Pray

II. God describes His nature and character to Moses

- A. There are three phrases in **Exodus 34:6-7** which we have not yet looked at. All three are in **vs 7**, and all three reveal truths about God's nature and character that we need to know and understand. These phrases are:
 1. "Who keeps lovingkindness for thousands."
 2. "Yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished,"
 3. "Visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."

B. **Who keeps lovingkindness for thousands**

1. After describing Himself as abounding in loving-kindness and truth, God goes on to say He keeps lovingkindness for thousands.
 - a. The word "**keep**" speaks of maintaining something in an unchanged condition, or persevering it in an unchanged state. In other words, when God says He keeps lovingkindness for thousands, He is saying He shows the same love driven tenderness to you as He has shown and continues to show to everyone else – from Adam and Eve onward.
 - b. In using the word "**thousands**," God is saying that His lovingkindness is limitless.
 - (1) In other words, God will never run out of love driven tenderness, because His supply is inexhaustible.
 - (2) For example, just as God had enough for Israel after they made the golden calf, so He has enough for you and for me after we make foolish and sinful choices.
2. Now there may be times when you think God is doing more for others than He is doing for you – that His lovingkindness is not spread around evenly.
 - a. And I understand how it can seem that way – especially when you focus on what God **is doing** for others and what He **isn't doing** for you, or when you are looking at what **others have** and **you don't**.
 - b. However, such a perspective is not only dishonest, it is the devil's tool to make you feel cheated and make God look bad.

- c. You've heard the term, not all that glitters is gold. Well, not everything that others have is a blessing from God. Sometimes what they have are problems or even disasters waiting to happen.
- d. And in a similar way, many of the things you don't have are not the result of God failing you or loving you less. Rather, your lack is a result of God blessing you by working in you a great good.
 - (1) The problem is that many Christians don't see it that way because they want what they don't have rather than valuing the gift of spiritual growth and transformation that God is working in them through what they don't have or through what He is not doing for them.
 - (2) And what makes all this even worse is that those Christians who act as if God is failing them are so focused on what they don't have and what God is not doing for them that they overlook the many treasures God has given them and the many kindnesses God has shown them and the love God has lavished on them.
- e. My point here is that our perspective has a strong influence on whether we see God's lovingkindness as it really is, or as something other than it is.
 - (1) Thankfully, our perspective doesn't change God at all, In other words, our perspective doesn't make God good or bad, trustworthy or untrustworthy, loving or uncaring, partial or impartial.
 - (2) However, our perspective does change us, in that it changes our view of God and the degree to which we trust God.
 - (3) And so I urge you, confidently and perpetually believe that **God keeps lovingkindness for thousands.**

C. **Yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished**

- 1. After saying He keeps lovingkindness for thousands, God says that He forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin. And following His statement about forgiveness, God says, "**yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.**"
- 2. Paul says something similar in **Galatians 6:7-8**, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. [8] For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life."

3. When God says He will punish the guilty, He is talking about inflicting a penalty – such as pain, loss, confinement, or death – on someone for having continued willfully doing what they know is wrong. In this sense, punishment is the next step after discipline.
 - a. For example, discipline is intended to teach a lesson in the hope of changing behavior.
 - b. Punishment has two other purposes.
 - (1) **First**, it is intended to repay a sinner for the harm they have done to others by their unrepentant and persistent sinful behavior.
 - (2) **Second**, it is intended to protect the family, community, nation, or even the world from further harm being done by the willful sin of an uncaring, unrepentant sinner.
 - c. Therefore, even though God is lovingly patient and gracious, **He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.**
4. To our credit, there is no lack among Christians of thinking about, singing about, and speaking about the compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, tender-hearted, and forgiving part of God's nature and character. Where we lack is thinking about, singing about, and speaking about the justice part, the discipline of Christian's part, and the punishment of unrepentant sinners part of God's nature and character.
5. Yet when God described Himself to Moses, He started by affirming His position as Lord, and He ended with the affirmation that unrepentant sinners, that is, those who willfully ignore His Lordship, will be punished, and the influence and consequences of their sin will have a destructive affect on subsequent generations.
6. Now I want to be perfectly clear that God's Lordship and His dealings with sinners takes nothing away from His compassion, grace, slowness to anger, abundance of lovingkindness, and forgiveness. And as Christians, we ought to rejoice and give glory to God for all these manifestations of His nature and character.
7. Yet at the same time, we ought to rejoice and give glory to God that He is just, and that He does discipline His children when they continue in sin, and He does punish unrepentant sinners. Why?
 - a. Because it is His justice and the discipline of His children that keeps Christians from taking excessive advantage of His compassion, grace, mercy, and love – and that, in turn, prevents the Christian home, the church, the community, and the world from being worse than they are.

- b. And it is His justice and His punishment of unrepentant sinners that is part of preventing them from sinning uncontrollably – which if they were free to sin uncontrollably would turn our world into hell, minus the perpetual fire.
 - 8. Therefore, let us value God’s justice, discipline, and punishment just as much as we value His compassion, grace, slowness to anger, abundance of lovingkindness, and forgiveness. And when we have a mindset that values them equally, it is likely we will rejoice and give thanks that God says, **“He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”**
- D. But He doesn’t stop there, He goes on to say that He “visits the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.”
- 1. Now you may be thinking this is unfair. Why should the sin of one person or a few people or a group of people have a destructive affect on subsequent generations? Better yet, why would God, who is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in loving-kindness and truth, and who forgives make subsequent generations suffer the effects of an earlier generations sin?
 - 2. For me, the most obvious answer is, **deterrence**.
 - a. Consider: If we think that only some sins do great harm – such as murder and rape – and that most sins do little to no harm, beyond displeasing God, and if we believe the sins we commit are in the little to no harm group, and if pleasing self takes priority over pleasing God when it comes to committing those sins that we think are basically harmless, then we will continue to commit those sins.
 - b. Is it not true that when it comes to the category of sins we think are basically harmless, we are far more concerned with getting caught and looking bad or having to pay the consequences then we are with the harm our sin does to others? And how many of us even think about the harm our sin will have on the next generation?
 - c. You see, when loving God and pleasing God is not reason enough to stop sinning, the next best motivation is the fear of God. And in this case, the fear of God comes from realizing that a price will be paid – not only by you – the sinner, but by those you love, and by those who come forth – in future generations – from those you love. This is **deterrence**!

- d. And though I only included those you love in my last statement, my hope is that your Christian faith is such that you will care about the good of the community and the next generation as much as you care about your family members and fellow believers and dear friends.
- 3. There is another way to look at the price the next generations will pay for our sinfulness, but this way does not include God's direct participation as clearly as God, Himself, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations.
 - a. Let me start with two things that I am convinced are facts.
 - (1) **First**, each generation must come to terms with God for themselves, rather than because they have been raised in a Christian home, or brought up in church, or because it is part of their culture, or a means to approval and acceptance, or a path to privileges they wouldn't otherwise have without becoming a Christian.
 - (2) In other words, my children and your children, my grandchildren and your grand-children must come to faith in God, trust God, humble themselves before God, love God, obey God, want to be godly so as to work seriously at becoming Godly, and serve God – **for themselves**.
 - (3) **Second**, if you are a serious minded and spiritually grounded Christian, the odds are your children will not be as seriously minded and as spiritually grounded as you.
 - (a) And the reality is, anything in your life that contradicts or adds an element of hypocrisy to your serious-minded Christianity will become a stumbling-block for your children and a reason for them to take God less seriously than you do.
 - (b) You have only to look at your own family or at the families of your Christian friends or at David, Solomon, and Rehoboam to see how true it is that the sin of a father potentially has a damaging effect on the next generations.
 - (c) But of course, should the next generation come to terms with God so as to take God and growth in godliness seriously, the downward cycle will be broken, and that child or those grand-children may even surpass you and me in knowing, loving, trusting, and serving God.

4. Now my purpose is not to discourage you, but to awaken you to a reality that you can do something about.
 - a. Think carefully about this – every sin, every bit of distrust of God, every unnecessary fear, every bit of anxiety and stress, every bit of ungodly or irrational thinking, every bit of anger, control, and unkind speech, every bit of sexual immorality, every bit of – and I could go on and on – but my point is that every bit of sin that you get rid of makes the damaging affect you have on the next generation that much less.
 - b. This is something you can do, and I am confident that when you love God, and love your children, and love your grand-children, and love the church, and love the community, and love the generations to come, you will do it.
 - c. And once again, if love is not enough to compel you to care this much about those who come behind you, then let the fear of God and the fear of sin's subsequent effects on future generations compel you.

III. Conclusion

- A. Just as God wants to deter sinners and limit the growth of sin by clearly stating that He will visit the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations, so He wants to encourage righteousness by clearly stating that His lovingkindness is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness extends to children's children (*the third generation*), to those who keep His covenant, and who remember His teachings to do them (**Psalm 103:17-18**).
- B. Our sin breeds sin in others, especially in our children and grandchildren. And though our righteousness may not breed righteousness in our children or grand-children, it will bring God's blessings into their lives, and what greater gift can you give them then that?