

“God’s Mercy and God’s Judgment”

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10

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We continue this week where we left off last week. David has signed Uriah’s death warrant in order to cover his crimes. As a consequence, Uriah is struck down and killed on the field of battle. Let’s listen for God’s Word to us:

²⁶ When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. ²⁷ After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.

¹ The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ "Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸ I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. ⁹ Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

¹¹ "This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to

one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight. ¹² You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.' "

¹³ Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die."

I know you are paying attention to my preaching when you begin to ask what's coming up next. Last week someone said, "So what happens to David after Uriah is killed?" I said, "That's next week's sermon! I'm not there yet!" I did what many of us do when we don't know the answer. I made something up. And I went on to say, "nothing much" which really isn't accurate. It became patently clear as the week wore on, I *really* wasn't there yet!

Because what happens to David and his family in the aftermath of Uriah's murder is nothing short of disaster.

Here's a thumbnail sketch of the fallout. First, David and Bathsheba's baby dies. Next, David's grown son Amnon rapes his own sister. As if that isn't awful enough, another of David's sons, Absalom, kills Amnon to avenge the rape. Absalom then betrays his father and conspires to the throne. Absalom is murdered by David's right hand man, Joab.

Was this series of disasters God's judgment on David? Many people think David reaped what he sowed. Some draw a direct connection between David's response to Nathan's parable (***He must pay for that lamb four times over!***) to the four terrible things that would soon befall David's own family.

It makes a strange sort of sense, but there's at least one big problem with drawing this conclusion. When we do, we assume a particular image of God, This is the God of the huge ledger book, the God who keeps account of our rights and wrongs. From time to time, when the debt gets too big, God calls us to account and metes out some punishment to 'even the score'.

Sometimes, as in David's case, things get so bad God has to push the "smite" button. Nothing like a good smiting to keep people in line.

There's another problem with this point of view. Sometimes awful things just happen. Like when a young woman is killed in a car accident. If you believe God deals out punishments to fit crimes, what possibly could have been the crime when a talented and godly young woman is struck down?

I don't know about you, but this particular image of God bothers me. This image of God is troubling, because when all is said and done, none of us can end up with a positive balance in our account.

Any fool can see David did some awful things. David's situation is absolutely clear cut. He committed adultery, he lied and schemed, he murdered!

We are not nearly so bad. And yet. . .

There is no one among us who is righteous, not even one. Paul's statement in Romans assumes that humans are fundamentally flawed. When you look around, when you hear about horrendous things going on, it's hard to deny human sin is everywhere. It's also hard to deny it when we take an honest look at ourselves.

Left to our own devices and desires, we are self-centered and sinful. This is not just a concept that comes to us from the first century. This view was espoused by the 16th Century reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin. Calvin saw human brokenness as inescapable. Even our best selves, our noblest acts, are tinged with sin.

In the 20th Century, Niebuhr reminded us that sin is not just personal. It is embedded in the very fabric of society. Even the best governments and most humanitarian organizations are riddled with brokenness. **No one is righteous, not even one.** This view is all but forgotten these days.

Novelist Philip Roth calls this 'the Human Stain'. He says, "It's in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before its mark. . .The stain that precedes disobedience, that encompasses disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding." ¹ Who knew Philip Roth was a Calvinist?

Most of the time, most of us think we're pretty good people. As long as we don't harm others, we think we're basically fine. Self-respect, affirmation, positive self-concept---these are the buzzwords of our day.

But friends, this isn't what God has in mind. God held David, and God holds us, to a higher standard. God didn't say, "Just stay out of serious trouble. Commit no grievous crimes against humanity." God said, ***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself."***

¹ From his 2000 novel, "The Human Stain"

All your heart. **All** of it. **As** yourself. Who of us loves our neighbor as much as we love ourselves? No one. It's impossible. And since it's impossible, we are doomed if God keeps a ledger book.

So if God doesn't keep accounts, what does God do? The Bible tells us. God deals both mercy and judgment. Both grace and punishment. Love and wrath.

It all boils down to the **relationship** between God's mercy and God's judgment. I am indebted to preacher Fleming Rutledge for this insight. She says, "The Bible shows us in a thousand different ways that God's judgment *is an instrument of his mercy*. Judgment does not mean everlasting condemnation . . .it means a course correction. . . Wise parents have always known this. Rebuking a child, . . .in the context of unconditional love, is an action taken for the child's health."²

God is judges **because** God is merciful. God is wrathful **because** God is love. God condemns us **because** God wants us to repent.

The Good News is God longs to forgive us. Yes, terrible things happened in David's family. Maybe it was because David was a lousy father. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that David was a liar, a womanizer, a murderer. Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe it's just because David was a sinner, just like us.

What we do know from this particular confrontation with Nathan is that David was repentant. David could have easily dismissed Nathan. David could have fired Nathan. David could even have had him put him to death!

We know David was repentant. But that is not all we know. We know God uses David, sinful and stained, prideful and broken, to accomplish God's purposes. This is what God desires for all of us. If God can use the likes of David, God can use us, too.

God wants us to look inside ourselves and admit our wrongdoing. To stop spending so much energy looking for loopholes. To quit trying to convince ourselves that we really are OK. Instead, God wants us to get down on our knees and take a cold hard look at our thoughts, our intentions, our actions. God wants us to heed the prophets of our own time, whoever they may be. If they are telling us exactly what we want to hear, they probably are not real prophets. If they never challenge us outside our comfort zone, they are probably not prophets. Because a real prophet must tell the truth, even when it hurts.

² From Fleming Rutledge's sermon, "Access to Power", cited in her book, [Help My Unbelief](#), p. 60

Repenting and seeking forgiveness is critical for all relationships, both human and divine. Ask anyone who's been married a long time. Ask anyone who's ever really loved anybody else. Love means having to say you are sorry, and more importantly, DOING something about it. When we genuinely seek and give forgiveness, we participate in the divine. We participate in the divine and we have hope.

We have hope because ***God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*** We are saved through the forgiving grace of God. Our hope is in Jesus, who was after all, called the Son of David, son of the sinful and stained, brother of the broken.