

# Covenant Word

## Why Doesn't God Do Something?

Exodus 20:1-20; Galatians 5:16-25; Matthew 21:33-46

*A Message by  
The Reverend Sarah  
Jackson Shelton  
Pastor  
Sunday  
October 8, 2017*

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for  
wanting to read and  
study these thoughts  
more carefully.  
Please know that I do  
not take full credit for  
anything that may be  
contained within,  
because I may have  
read or heard  
something at some  
point during my  
pilgrimage and do not  
remember its source  
and thus, cannot give  
the rightful author  
his/her credit. I pray  
that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**



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*Where Faith Comes to Life*

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Worship with us each Sunday  
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible  
study at 10:30 a.m.

The school never called to tell me. In fact, it wasn't until long after graduation that David let it slip that he just quit going to gym class. A permissive, and I suspect insightfully kind, librarian allowed him a quiet corner to do his homework each day. You see, he had been assigned gym in the last period of the day. He was dressing out with all the football players who, on most days, just ran during this hour to warm up for football practice. Supposedly there was instruction and supervision, but one coach was driving the school bus and the other was lining up X's and O's for the play book. They did not pay attention when the class met or when the class was changing in the locker room.

While I don't know exactly what went on to make our son find refuge in the library, I do remember a homecoming parade where the football team held signs that read "God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve." Because one of the children holding that sign had been a guest in our home too many times to count, my disapproving stare was enough to make him move to the other side of the float. Unbeknownst to my family, I wrote a letter to the school administration about my dismay that such a thing was permitted. I never got a response. But now, our own son, was telling me he had suffered, in some way, at the hands of these same boys! I pushed him to tell me about it. He adamantly refused, looking me in the eye saying, "Mom, you really don't want to know."

I did not invite this violence into my family. I taught my children, along with your help, to be loving and grateful, forgiving and empathetic. I

taught them to use their words and to seek the help of a trusted adult. I taught them about gentle hands and that the word "no" carries firm boundaries. If I had been so careful to prime my child then why didn't God do something to intervene? Why didn't God protect him? Why didn't God keep him safe from the world's realities?

When David comes home now, he is usually accompanied by Joe. We love Joe. Joe is "easy in his skin." He is dependable and curious and kind. But when they go out to meet up with friends, I still find myself saying, "Remember where you are." David's dutiful response is, "Right, I am not in the city. I am home in Alabama."

I wonder if last Sunday anyone stopped to think, "I am not at home. I am in Las Vegas. I will be a sitting target in an open air venue for anyone who decides to use military-grade weapons on a shooting spree?" All week, I have wondered how many of the victim's families have asked the question, "Why didn't God do something?" I have wondered about this almost every day since violent storms tore across the

## **Why didn't God protect him? Why didn't God keep him safe from the world's realities?**

Caribbean and South. I wonder about it when I hear language besotted with violent, taunting words. Why doesn't God do something about the random shootings in Birmingham and around the world? Why doesn't God do something about children whose innocence is violently snatched away? Why doesn't God do something about nations at war? Does God not hear our prayers for peace?

I almost feel as if I should apologize for today's parable that confronts us with the same types of violence that so defines our world. Today's text shouts with relevance. Let's remember the context.

You will remember from last Sunday that after Jesus makes the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, He goes to the Temple and basically throws a gauntlet down before the Scribes and Pharisees. It is the last straw in their ongoing disagreements. The Scribes and

Pharisees are stuck in all the laws, like the ones we read together earlier, and so they have no tolerance for a new kingdom nor its proclaimer who seems determined to challenge their well-established ways. So they immediately question Him about His authority. In response, Jesus tells the parable about the two sons of a land owner. One agrees to work the vineyard for the father, but never shows up. The other refuses to work initially but does the work later. Jesus puts the question to the Temple's scholars: "Which one does the will of the Father, the one who SAYS all the right things or the one who DOES all the right things?"

He makes his point, but Jesus is on a roll. He can't stop himself. And so to add insult to injury, Jesus continues with yet another parable. This vineyard has a land owner who extravagantly cares for it. The land owner himself plants the vineyard, places a protective hedge row around the vineyard, digs the wine press, builds a look-out tower and personally selects the tenants who will care for the vineyard in his absence. Everything the tenants need is provided. They do not lack for any tools or equipment, because the land owner has made every provision. The tenants' only job is to care for the vineyard in-between the planting and the harvesting, because the land owner will send servants to collect the fruit. But when the servants come, violence erupts. Note the words used: seized, beat, kill, stone, put to a miserable death, broken to pieces, crush. The tenants beat one, kill another and stone the third. When the land owner hears about it, instead of calling out the National Guard, he sends more servants. The same is done to them by the wicked tenants. Violence

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breaks out everywhere and still the land owner seeks no strong arm of the law. Instead, this land owner does a very questionable thing. He sends his very own son, thinking that the tenants will surely have respect for the son. The son has not one thing with which to defend himself, and so when the son arrives, they kill him too. They do so in hopes that they will receive his inheritance, in other words that they will reap the harvest not just that particular season but every season yet to come.

Now do the actions of the land owner make sense to you? Why does the land owner allow the tenants to get away

with repeatedly mistreating and even killing the land owners' emissaries without any reprisal? (Alyce McKenzie, "Who Are the Wicked Tenants?" 9-25-11) Why would the vineyard owner risk sending additional servants after the first group is attacked and killed?

***And after hearing about fathers and sons, land owners and vineyards, we slowly realize that the Kingdom of God is not like anything we know or understand as being even slightly similar to how we might do things.***

And why would he send his only son when both sets of servants have already been killed? Why doesn't the land owner do something to stop the violence?

It doesn't make sense! It is absolutely crazy. These tenants have used up all nine of their lives and all three of their strikes. Surely every last chance is gone, and the land owner is at the end of his rope. His patient and undeserved mercy, however, seems to have no end. Who else would respond to such violence in this way? No one! ... except for a land lord who is so desperate to be in relationship with the tenants that he will do anything, risk everything, in order to reach out to them. The land owner isn't after a successful business. No, this land owner is after relationship. (David Lose, "Crazy Love," 9-28-14)

Remember that Jesus begins this whole section of lessons with "The Kingdom of God is like..." And after hearing about fathers and sons, land owners and vineyards, we slowly realize that the Kingdom of God is not like anything we know or understand as being even slightly similar to how we might do things. This is evidenced by the Pharisees' answer when Jesus asks, "What will the Landlord do when he, himself, comes?" They indicate that they believe he will give the tenants a miserable death. This doesn't sound unreasonable to our ears, for it is likely that we would send armed troops to reclaim the vineyard and re-establish our authority over it. You know, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, man the battle stations and all that. To continue the cycle of violence, however only serves to indict us. It shows how very much we are like the Pharisees listening that day in the Temple, because we are like those wicked, greedy tenants who are defensive of that for which they have worked. We forget our place as care keepers and NOT as owners. Could this, right in the middle of this violent parable, be a lesson on stewardship? Think about how often we talk about OUR money, OUR time, OUR church as if we are the owners of these things, when in reality the only owner is God. We are just mere tenants for the in-between time and yet, we do everything we can to place a claim on what is not rightfully ours.

So what does God do when we forget our rightful place? What does God do when we strike back in possessive rage, putting to death the very things that could be life-giving? How can we stop the reactive cycle? We ask, "Why doesn't God do something?" when a better question seems to be, "Why don't we do something?"

Listening carefully to the teachings of Jesus, we know this answer to what God has done to address our violence, for we have met the likes of this landlord before. This landlord forgives seven times seventy. This landlord welcomes the prodigal home with a celebration. This landlord leaves the other 99 in order to search for the one. This landlord looks high and low for the one lost dowry coin. This landlord pays those who come at 5 in the afternoon to work in his vineyard the exact same amount as those who worked since day break. Remember that this landlord is not fair, this landlord is generous, and so this landlord sends his son. Yes, this God sends Jesus who dies for our misunderstanding of who we are and then is raised from the dead to continue to bear the message of God's

***If we cannot live with an awareness of the marvelous gift we have been given in the Kingdom of God, then it will be taken away from us and given to others who can live by the Spirit's tenets of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.***

desperate love and desire to be in relationship with us. So when we ask, "Why doesn't God do something?" the truth is that God has already acted. God has done what no one else has dared. God sent God's only son for our sakes.

In that light, then, it seems that the question needs to be changed to "Why don't we do something?" When might we turn from our tendency toward retaliation and revenge and instead, take on peace and hope? How might we organize our lives in ways that speak to healing rather than continue to hate the hurt we have experienced?

The Washington Post (10-3-17) carried a story this week about an auto parts salesman, Kody Robertson, who attended the Luke Combs concert in Las Vegas. He introduced himself to Michelle Vo over casual conversation during the concert, and they became friends. In the final act, they looked together for the fireworks they could hear but not see until they realized that the headline act was running from the stage. It was at that time, Michelle got hit by a bullet, and Kody threw his body over hers to protect her from being hit again. When the shooting finally seemed to stop, Kody and another carried Michelle from the venue to where a white pick-up truck that was taking the wounded to a nearby hospital.

With Michelle gone, rather than seeking a safe place, Kody ran back into the venue to check pulses and carry wounded out, sometimes using a cooler as his transport.

He happened upon Michelle's purse. He tracked down her cell phone and began responding to frantic voice mails and text messages. Kody checked with hospitals but was having no luck in locating Michelle, until her brother-in-law called and directed Kody to Sunrise Hospital. It was there that he found her. She had not made it. He connected the doctor to her family.

Before Kody could leave the hospital, however, counselors talked with him. Complete strangers surrounded him with hugs and words of comfort and prayer. Denny's brought in hot food. His boss told him to take as much time as he needed before returning to work. Southwest airlines allowed him to change his flight, and his hotel extended the stay on his room. Not more violence, but person after person responding with the fruits of God's kingdom: love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control.

As I have compared the violent work of one person against the thousands who lit candles, held IV bags, put their own lives in danger as first responders; who gave blood, sent money, offered prayers; who rang bells, sang songs and lent courage at 59 funerals, I can't help but see a variance in numbers that is staggering: one person over against all of this peace making.

It falls to us to say the gentle word that turns away anger. It falls to us to extend friendship in the face of an enemy's warfare. It falls to us to light a candle and curse the darkness. It falls to us to use our imaginations in order to find a way other than violence in our relationships. We must do it for our own survival, but we must also do it because of Jesus' warning. If we cannot live with an awareness of the marvelous gift we have been given in the Kingdom of God, then it will be taken away from us and given to others who can live by the Spirit's tenets of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control.

What is God doing?

God is redeeming the world through Jesus Christ. My prayer for us this week as we go into the world is that we will possess the eyes to see that God is doing something unexpected; that we will have the ears to hear God's unexpected message of grace and hope; that we will possess the courage to speak of the surprising good news of the gospel; and that we will possess hopeful hearts that keep believing that God is doing something amazing around and within us, and if we are not careful, in spite of us! May it be so, Amen.

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