

God is Easy to Live With

Text: Psalm 103: 13-14
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on all who fear him. For he knows how we are made, he knows full well that we are dust. Psalm 103: 13-14

The Psalmist begins this Psalm with a call to his own being to bless the Lord. The Psalm ends with the same call, now inviting the whole created order and all created beings to join in the praise of God. The body of the Psalm witnesses to who God is by pointing to all God does, thus giving the cause for gratitude which issues in the praise of God.

Psalm 103 is an expression of pure praise. Nothing is requested; no plea or complaint is expressed. It is simply a paean of praise to the good and gracious God, a God Who is easy to live with. The psalm flows; it is a spontaneous eruption of joy at the contemplation of the wonder of God's goodness, compassion and grace. It is the amazement at the realization of Who God is and what He has done and continues to do.

Praise is spontaneous. It arises in our hearts; it erupts on our lips; it breaks forth, irrepressible. The Psalmist calls himself to consciousness of God's mercy; praise is the result. Praise cannot be coerced; forced, it is not praise.

But we learn from the Psalmist that it is in the contemplation of God in His saving acts toward us, His mercy and goodness to us, that we put ourselves into the posture of praise. Let us listen as the Psalmist describes the God Whom he calls upon his soul to bless.

We bless God because of Who He has shown Himself to be. Old Testament faith was not speculative and abstract. Rather, the God Whom Israel praises was *the God Who revealed Himself in human experience*.

He was the God Who revealed Himself to Moses. That brings to expression the whole history of redemption in which Israel was called and claimed by God to be

His people. Israel had a sense of being God's chosen people. In the Exodus event, God freed their Fathers from Egypt's bondage. He was the God Who led them through the wilderness and brought them into the promised land. In His revelation of Himself to Moses, He made Himself known as merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Mercy, grace, steadfast love - what a list of attributes that makes. He was the God of salvation; He set His people free from the galling slavery that de-humanized and oppressed. He provided for them, nurtured them and established them in their own land. Israel's history was a history of salvation of the Mighty God Who delivered them. In Exodus, as Israel gathered at Mount Sinai and prepared to receive the Law, these were Moses' words to them:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples.... Exodus 19: 4-5

That beautiful image expresses well Israel's sense of being called and claimed by God.

But not only in their corporate history, but also in their personal, human experience, the Old Testament people had a sense of God's grace and mercy. Just listen to the five verbs of verses 3-5. God *pardons, heals, redeems, crowns, satisfies*. Consequently, His people live as renewed persons, kept in the steadfast love of God.

Expanding on the first blessing mentioned - God's pardoning grace - the Psalmist gives us one of the most vivid figures of speech found anywhere to describe what God does with our wrongs. Here is the marvelous surprise: God does not deal with us as we might expect to be dealt with.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requites us according to our iniquities.

How often we get things out of focus. We grumble and complain. We are prone to look on the dark side, feeling we have gotten a bum deal. We luxuriate in self-pity and whimper while we nurse our wounds and rationalize our poor showing. But the reality is far different! God does not deal with us as we deserve.

C.S. Lewis, in *The Great Divorce*, tells of a busload of folk from the grey, misty flats of purgatory who take a bus excursion to the borders of heaven to see if they might desire permanent residence there. One of the "tourists" meets a man known to him on earth who was tried and executed for committing a murder. The man is now a citizen of heaven. The visitor is amazed to find the murderer there. He cries out, "What I'd like to understand is what you're here for, as pleased as

Punch, you a murderer, while I've been walking the streets down there and living in a place like a pigsty all these years."

The citizen of heaven tries to explain that he had been forgiven the crime and that both he, the murderer, and the man he murdered had been reconciled at the judgment seat of God. But the "spirit" from purgatory would have none of it. It was unjust, unfair! He keeps protesting that it is not right, and all he demands is his rights.

"I've got to have my rights, same as you, see!"

"Oh, no," the citizen of heaven assures him, "It's not as bad as that. I haven't got my rights, or I should not be here. You will not get yours, either. You will get something far better."

Thank God we do not get our rights. Thank God justice is not done. Thank God His grace is greater than all our sin.

Will Campbell learned the heart of the Gospel the hard way one day. It was during the days of great tension and ugliness of the Civil Rights Movement in the South. A young seminarian and a black man were gunned down in cold blood by a Southern sheriff. Will and his brother were with a friend who would have nothing to do with the Gospel, when they heard the news. The friend put Will, himself a minister of the Gospel, on the spot. In effect, he said, "What will your God do about such an outrage? Can that sheriff be forgiven?" Will, his own heart broken and full of anguish, knew this was the acid test. Did he believe the Gospel? He answered, "Yes."

So, the murdered and the murderer are alike loved by God?

Yes. Then, what is this Gospel of yours? We are all bastards and God loves us anyway?

"Yes," Will replied.

That is the scandalous Gospel we believe.

He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities.

This is the testimony of the whole of Scripture.

He blots out our sins as a thick cloud. He casts them behind His back. He buries our sins in the depths of the sea. He remembers them against us no more.

We remember our sins. We remember the sins of our neighbors. We nurse them, fume and fuss about them, burden ourselves with them, wallow in them.

But, God puts them away - forever.

No wonder the Psalmist said,

Bless the Lord, O my soul!

How does He deal with us? With compassion! Like a parent deals with a child.

But no earthly parent begins to realize the magnitude of God's compassion. The best of human parenting is only a faint reflection of the parental love of God. It gives us an image we can grasp and begin to understand. But God's Fatherly compassion surpasses our best insight and understanding.

The Psalmist calls us to bless the Lord because of the way He loves us – human as we are.

*He knows how we were made.
He knows full well that we are dust.*

Here is not only a beautiful statement about God, but here, too, is the charter of our humanness. In the Scriptures we find surprisingly that it is all right to be human. Does not this statement reflect the Psalmist's understanding that God loves us and accepts us in our very humanness?

The Bible celebrates that humanness. In the eighth Psalm we read of both our smallness when compared with the cosmos and our greatness in that we were created a little less than God. In this Psalm we sense that the Psalmist believed that God fully understands us in our humanness.

We are not God. We are not angels. We are human.

To be human is to be finite, limited. To be human is to have to choose, to decide, to act on limited knowledge and insight. To be human is to struggle to find the balance between freedom and responsibility. To be human is to be part of the created order of the earth and to feel the tug of that which connects us to the earth and to be created in the image of God, made for and called to fellowship with God. To be human is to be a person in process, a pilgrim, a struggler.

We have not allowed ourselves to be very comfortable in the Church being human. We do get down on ourselves. We condemn ourselves and we are harder on ourselves than anyone else and we are harder on ourselves than God is. Somehow we've gotten the message that it is not all right to be human. We just do not measure up.

In the Church - in religion in general - there is a large measure of moralism. There is a strong stress on the "ought." There is the threat and warning about our shortcomings, the constant call to do more, to do better. There is that constant

pressure to perform and there is the equally constant sense of falling short. The "message" seems to be that it is not "OK" to be human.

Dr. J. Harold Ellens gave a paper to a Christian Psychological Association some years ago in which he addressed the relationship of worship and emotional health. The whole paper is full of insight and greatly impressed me when first I read it. On our present focus, Ellens writes:

Worship is the celebration of a feat accomplished and being realized. That fact is the historical datum certifying that God was uniquely in Jesus of Nazareth "reconciling the world unto Himself." The celebration of worship is the act and experience of taking profound and grateful account of God's demonstrated nature and behaviour: He is for us, not against us.

Humans natively envision God as a threat. ...It may well be that man's native view of God as a threat derives from the natural state of anxiety which seems to be coincident with self-consciousness. ...Worship as the celebration of God's grace addresses itself essentially to human anxiety regarding God, self, and one's world of relationships. This follows directly from the fact that the Christian "good news" is the announcement of man's freedom from those threats - freedom to be and become oneself.

The purpose of worship, then, is the achievement of emotional health and spiritual wholeness in the form of relief from destructive anxiety by means of the celebration of God's grace.

Ellens stresses the fact that worship either incites and embodies experiences of forgiveness, acceptance and a desirable destiny, or enforces guilt, shame and bondage. Worship either frees or sickens. Speaking directly to the point I am making in this message, Ellens writes:

The process of worship must provide a comfortable and safe arena for humans to deal with their real *inadequacy* to the responsibilities of life and the challenges of godliness, as well as their *sense of inadequacy as humans*. The two are usually quite different and the difference is often the dimension of man's dishonesty, self-deception and pathology including psychic conflict. Worship must provide opportunity and necessity for humans to face their real humanness without employing the typical pathological techniques of self-deception, deception of the community, or mechanisms of escape. Typical worship encourages rather than prevents such pathologies. However, when worship fails to lead people out of them, it cannot be healing. Where deception of self or the community is necessary or possible, freedom in God's grace is impossible. That is the setting for emotional illness, not health.

Ellens continues:

Worship must provide such humans with the strength and safety to face the crushing reality of our personal and communal potential for *envisioning* sainthood, on the one hand, and our inability to *produce* sainthood on the other. It is not a new insight that man is at war with *his self*. It would be a new experience if worship consistently resolved that conflict in the peace of grace. ... To achieve a healing emotional response, liturgy must provide for honest, relief-affording resolution of the anxiety and ego-insult inevitable to our internal conflicts. This requires aiding persons, through worship, to realize and act out the fact that it is acceptable to be human and sinful. Worship must aid persons and the community to realize on the emotional level that that acceptability is precisely what divine grace and Christian graciousness means.

There is much more that could be said on this point, but this is enough to indicate how in worship we should experience the Psalmist's insight that God knows how we are made, knows we are "dust" or "clay" – people in conflict, full of anxiety, loaded with guilt and a sense of inadequacy, needing the good news of an unconditional love and total acceptance of the God Who knows it all better than we do and has already handled our dilemma in the gift of Jesus and the grace which there came to expression. He meets our guilt with forgiving grace, our inadequacy with the total adequacy of Jesus, our weakness with the strength He provides, and calls us simply to trust Him that it is so and to rest in the abyss of His love.

To catch a glimpse of such a God and such a redemption is simply to praise, spontaneously, irrepressibly. The Psalmist calls his soul to reflect on this good and gracious God and then he knows praise will flow.

Praise cannot be coerced. C.S. Lewis was at first put off by all the calls, "Praise God," when first he became a Christian, until he came to realize that praise was simply the overflow of the enjoyment of the object of praise – in this case, the enjoyment of God. When we read a great novel or experience a great concert or see a beautiful sunset, we want to tell somebody about it. The fun of a good joke is sharing it.

So is the praise of God. Lewis says praise is "inner health made audible." I'm sure he is right. Show me a person full of praise and I will show you a person healthy and happy.

Some of us are praisers.

Some of us are simply "chronic grumps." Again, praise cannot be coerced; either it is "felt" and thus will be expressed, or we remain numb and dumb. But we need not be fatalists, simply resigning ourselves to being "grumps," going through life groveling in the mire when we could soar with eagles. We can talk to ourselves; we can take ourselves in hand as did the Psalmist. We can become conscious of

the chronic posture of our souls and we can become self-conscious, reflecting on patterns that may be deeply ingrained.

Rather than viewing a magnificent sunset and grumbling, "Well, another day shot," we can bask in a few moments of beauty. We can sense the cool, crispness of the autumn morning and remember this is our Father's world. We can feel the smooth softness of a newborn's cheek and revel in the wonder of a child. We can call upon ourselves to become conscious of the very gift of life and the resources for facing even the most difficult circumstances. We cannot contemplate the God Who "pardons, heals, redeems, crowns and satisfies" and not sense within the upsurge of emotion that finds expression in praise. Then with all creation and all the angels of heaven we can bless the Lord and experience the wellbeing of His grace and goodness, the God Who is easy to live with.

Amen.