

PALM SUNDAY - THE CROSS OF CHRIST AS THE BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO VIOLENT RELIGIOUS TERRORISM

Sunday, April 14th, 2019, 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2123

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John 18:33-37 - "So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" [34] Jesus answered, "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" [35] Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered you over to me. What have you done?" [36] Jesus answered, "*My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting,* _that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." [37] Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world— to bear witness to the truth. *Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice.*"

I'm going to come back to a very important phrase in this text in just a few minutes. The phrase is found in **verse 36** - "Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. *If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting,* that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." That is a very profound statement from Jesus' lips.

But here's what made me stop and think about this subject. Many years ago I taught right through the book of Judges on Sunday mornings. And there are some very disturbing passages to consider in those books of Old Testament history. Over and over again you see the people of God **fighting**. What's more, they're fighting because **God** commands them to fight. They're driving out enemies they don't even really know. And they're doing so because obedience to God **demand**s they fight and kill.

There have to be some people who thoughtfully ask, "Is this how God works? Is it our job to stand up and fight - I mean **physically** fight - all those who oppose our God? Is this what God's heart is like? Is this the Christian message for today?"

And the reason they ask that question is they can see the fruit of that kind of approach all over the world today. There are segments of this world's religions that adhere to the principle that faithfulness to their god demands violence to all who blaspheme him. And we can see the fruit of that kind of thinking splattered all over our evening news. All sorts of groups fight for the front of the line when it comes to claiming "**credit**" for retribution in the name of their god.

In our text Jesus seems to say this is **not** the way Father God works. He says, because His kingdom is **not** of this world, His followers don't come **fighting** for His honor. He says they **would** fight if His kingdom **were** of this world. But it **isn't**. So His disciples don't take the physical offensive in fighting His enemies. They let Jesus die. They don't **physically** defend Him. That's not the way His kingdom advances. Physical violence can't produce devotion or loyalty to the Biblical Creator God. You can't prove your love for Jesus through exerting physical violence. His kingdom simply can't be advanced that way.

Fair enough. But then how are we to explain so much of the Old Testament? Is this a **different** God? Or has the God of the New Testament somehow **evolved** into a higher moral being - somehow more gracious and loving than He was in Old Testament times? How are we going to explain this? And what difference does the cross of Jesus, God the Son, make? That's the subject of this Palm Sunday teaching.

1) **BEFORE THE DEATH OF JESUS CHRIST ON THE CROSS, THE ONLY WAY GOD COULD REVEAL HIMSELF AS A HOLY GOD WAS TO VISIBLY PUNISH THE WICKED**

And the only way to reveal sin to be **horribly** wicked was to make the visible punishment of it **extreme**. In other words, there was nothing **arbitrary** in God's dealing with human wickedness. There are places where God actually took the time to **explain** His punishment of the wicked so even Israel wouldn't misunderstand His violent actions:

Deuteronomy 9:4-5 - "Do not say in your heart, after the Lord your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas *it is because of the wickedness of these nations* that the Lord is driving them out before you. [5] *Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations* the Lord your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

So in this divine theocracy God wanted His own covenant people to see and learn that there was a **correlation** between sinfulness and divine judgment. In this early time of revelation, before mankind had a full picture of God

in Christ Jesus, and before there were police forces and secular legal authority structures like we have today. God was going to great lengths to create a sense of the **seriousness** and **weight** of sin.

Somehow people had to be made to see their rebellion against God was a huge problem - that it spilled over into families, nations, and children with pain and misery and death - just as He said it would when Eve and Adam disobeyed Him in the garden.

Also, God revealed that while His judgment was **severe**, it was also mixed with great **patience**. There are several passages where God reveals His reluctance to display His wrath quickly or suddenly:

Genesis 15:12-16 - "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. [13] Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. [14] But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. [15] As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. [16] And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

Why would Israel have to spend four hundred years in captivity? Why so long? The reason given is **God's reluctance to rush to judgment on the Amorites**. They didn't yet **deserve** the full display of God's wrath. God wasn't arbitrarily playing favorites with His justice.

Notice, God refused to deliver even His **own** people until those who blasphemed His name had filled up their hearts to the full measure of God's coming wrath. God was demonstrating that, while His judgment was **severe**, it wasn't irrational or random.

But this is only the **beginning** of the explanation for the violence commanded in the Old Testament. So far, on the surface of things, one would see very little difference between the actions of Yahweh and the actions of the world's violent religious actions. We need to proceed further and deeper.

2) **ALL THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT GOD WAS PRESERVING AN EARTHLY KINGDOM, AN ETHNIC KINGDOM, AND A POLITICAL KINGDOM. HE IS DOING NONE OF THE ABOVE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Remember our opening text. Jesus makes clear His kingdom is **not** of this world. But there was a time when God's kingdom **was** of this world. And it is simply stunning to me how few Christians understand this central foundational point. What God was doing through the Old Testament with the **Jews** is totally different from what He is doing in the New Testament with the **church**. If this isn't kept in mind, nothing in the Scriptures will make sense.

Just on the side, this, to my mind, is the fundamental flaw with linking up the practice of infant baptism with the Old Covenant practice of circumcision. The New Testament sign of **believer's** baptism is designed to show, not **continuity** with the Old Testament covenant sign, but **contrast** with the Old Testament covenant sign.

In the Old Testament God was laying down all sorts of laws and regulations designed to **protect the ethnic entity of the Jewish nation**. And the outward sign of circumcision was an outward sign of **ethnic identity**. This ethnic identity was necessary because it was through this Jewish nation that God would birth the Savior of the world.

Jesus didn't just fall down from the sky. He was **born** in accordance with divine promise and expectation. This was one way God was prompting the nations of the world to **recognize** Jesus when He was born. He made the creation and preservation of the Jewish people a **visible** miracle.

That's why God banished so many **mightier** Gentile nations with the **smaller, weaker** Jewish nation. This is not God being **racist**. This is God's plan to eventually reach the **whole world**. He was prompting the world to stand up and take note. This is why God provided the Jews with the miracle of the Promised Land. This is why God drove out nations that rebelled against His plan to put the spotlight on Israel and her inheritance. He wanted to create a situation where people would only be able to **explain** Israel in her Promised Land as an act of **God**.

All of this must be kept in remembrance. The whole Old Testament must be read with this understanding. God's **harshness** to the nations **opposing** God's plan for Israel was a manifestation of His ultimate, forthcoming **grace** for the whole world. If the world had nothing **striking** to observe in Israel, it would never see anything **fulfilling** in the coming of Jesus. And then the whole world would die in its sin.

3) WITH THE COMING OF JESUS, THE SAVIOR, GOD'S OLD TESTAMENT PURPOSE IN DEALING HARSHLY WITH HIS ENEMIES DISAPPEARS

Here's the important point right up front. God's plan is no longer to protect the ethnic identity of any one people group. Those distinctions are now obliterated in Christ Jesus, the **world's Messiah**. While it is true that, one day when Jesus comes again, God's kingdom will cover the whole earth, God is no longer building an **earthly** kingdom. We get that from Jesus Himself in our opening text - "**My kingdom is not of this world....**"(John 18:36).

Either that registers with you or it doesn't. God is not maintaining the distinct identity of an **ethnic** kingdom. He doesn't need regulations about diet, fabric, festivals, feast patterns, etc. That's because, in Christ, He is calling **all** peoples of **all** races, of **all** political stripes and **all** forms of government from **all** corners of the earth.

The kingdom God is building today is **not** political. It will never be inaugurated through the passing of certain laws, or the electing of certain leaders. It can't be advanced in the courts. It can't be extended through the raw exertion of power of any earthly kind. To all who think they can somehow create a "**Christian society**" through the power structures of this world, Jesus would scream, "**No! You don't get it. My kingdom is not of this world!**"

Do not betray Christ through blind religious zeal. Ponder deeply the difference between the power of influence of religions **without** a savior and the power of influence of Christianity **with** a Savior. This is the heart of everything important.

If a religion has **no redeemer** it has no recourse but retaliation when its god is blasphemed. The honor of its god and its prophets is only preserved through some form of outward might. That's because, without a **redeemer**, such a god or prophet can only issue decrees and laws. And the future of any such religion lies in its ability to ensure the dominance and enforcement of its laws.

Because Christians have a **Redeemer** they serve Christ, not by **taking** lives, but by **laying themselves down in loving service** to bring the lost the truth of God's mercy in Christ Jesus, God the Son. Whatever mistakes have been made in history, the kingdom of Christ is **never** advanced through **violence**, but through **blessing those who persecute us**. Jesus said so.

All the God-commanded violence of the Old Testament sacrificial system was to picture and pre-figure an innocent Lamb who would have His own holy blood **taken in violence**. Christians now have a **means** for forgiveness no other religion has. We come to all people with the same message and demonstration of divine grace for the guilty.

4) THE UNIQUE LIGHT OF THE CROSS OF JESUS

I close with two key texts:

1 Peter 3:14-16 - "**But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, [15] but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; [16] yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.**"

It's one thing to hold a conference explaining **how** we are to defend our faith. This is good and important. But the real point of this text is often missed. True, most of us can be taught to **explain** our faith with a good foundation of reason and argument. In fact, that's the **easy** part. The hard part of this text lies elsewhere. **How** do these pagans come to **ask** about our faith in the first place? That's the issue.

And Peter tells us the hard truth. People will only **ask** when they see our visible response to **undeserved abusive treatment**. This is the genius of the cross. This is the power of a **Savior** driven religion. People from **other** violent religions will ask about the **difference** they see in us. They will **ask** about Jesus when they see the **grace** of Jesus in response to their sins against **me** the way **Jesus** responds when people sin against **Him**.

Look at one more text:

Matthew 5:10-16 - "**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the**

kingdom of heaven. [11] "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. [12] Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.[13] You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.[14] "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. [16] In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

The lesson here is exactly the same. People can't be **coerced** into loving God. **Morality** can be legislated. But **love for God** can't be advanced through **laws**. And without love for God, people are still in their sins, no matter how moral they are. This is the radical difference in the kingdom of a **Savior**. This is the point where New Testament Christianity manifests its divine power and heart.

Notice, please, the way the illustrations of salt and light and the city on the hill that can't be hidden follow immediately on the beatitudes dealing with the disciples' response to **persecution (5:10-12)**. This is where the light of Christ shines. This is where religion with a crucified and risen Savior comes into its full stride. The world needs to see lives that don't make any sense to them at all apart from a suffering, loving, dying Savior. If your life makes perfect sense to the power loving, reputation preserving world around you, you **aren't** following Jesus.

Jesus wasn't a **persecutor**. He was the **persecuted**. His disciples follow in His steps. How our world needs the message of Palm Sunday. It's a truth that can't be spread through any means other than outpoured **sacrificial love** and a clear **proclamation of gospel truth**. Our persecuted, sacrificed Redeemer will one day rule all the earth.