

Love and Judgment

A Sermon By Rev. Mike Gladish

A Big Spiritual Dilemma

As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ each year we are confronted with the age old problem of reconciling two apparently contradictory principles: love and judgment. "For God so loved the world," we read, "that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Yet Jesus Himself said "For judgment I have come into the world..." (John 9:39). "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37).

What a curious fact. We normally think of God Himself as somehow requiring judgment, and Jesus as the loving Savior. But truth is the standard of judgment, and it does tend to condemn, since no one is perfect, indeed "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). So if Jesus came to teach the truth and to judge, how are we saved?

Most Christians say that we are saved by faith in the "fact" that He suffered and died on our behalf, offering Himself as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the whole human race (past, present and future). The idea is that in confronting the evils and falsities of the world He became a "lightning rod" for all the hatred of the world, and that by suffering on our behalf He relieved us of any need to suffer. In classic Christian theology this is called the "vicarious atonement."

But this makes the love of God rather demanding, don't you think? – that He should require a Divinely *human sacrifice* to move Him to pity and forgiveness? Indeed, it seems rather pagan, doesn't it? One gets the sense of an angry, jealous God demanding payment for the sins of the world and being appeased only by the brutal murder of His own Son. What kind of love is this, and what kind of judgment?

Unconditional Love?

What a contrast this is from all the talk we hear today about "unconditional love," that is, love that requires nothing but accepts all

people without qualification. We hear it everywhere! "God loves me just as I am." And it's TRUE! But does He love the WAY we are? Note the Gospel is ALL about the need to change, beginning with the first words of Jesus' public ministry, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17).

So how can we understand God's love? And how can we reconcile that love with what He does require?

Here's a simple answer: *God's love is such that He wants to make us happy to eternity* (True Christian Religion 43). You can't ask for much more than that.

But in order to *be* happy we have to live in harmony and co-operation with the laws of order. Who could possibly imagine that God would love our misery or our mistakes, our selfishness or our stupidity? No, it is *because* He loves us that He wants us NOT to be miserable, selfish or stupid. And *this love is unconditional, but it requires wisdom, or judgment to be effective.*

So getting back to Christmas, we can think of it this way: – God in His Infinite love says to Himself, "My people are miserable, what can I do to make them happy?" And from His infinite wisdom He replies, "I must go down there and show them how to find happiness; I must not force them, but teach them, and show them, so that they have a choice and can turn their lives around."

The Real Nature of Judgment, or Conditions for Salvation

There are two words in the Gospels for judgment. One refers to condemnation and the other to the concept of discernment, or prudence. The Lord in the Gospels clearly spoke of both, but when He taught He did not do so with any intention to condemn but rather "that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17). And here's the key: – not saved by His sacrificial death on the cross, but saved by the freedom that His teaching and a proper discernment of the truth provides (John 8:32) so that we can enjoy an orderly, fulfilling spiritual life.

And this freedom implies decisions, judgments that we must make. For example, there is no doubt that we should love all people, even as our heavenly Father loves all people, "making His sun to shine on the evil and on the good... sending rain on the just and on the unjust"

(Matthew 5:45), but we cannot love their evil or their falsity or their confusion or their grief. We cannot love it and we cannot confirm it or support it. Thus we cannot show our love for all people in the same way. Neither could the Lord, which is why He condemned the scribes and Pharisees even though presumably He loved them too.

And He said, "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4). Note, "*If he repents.*" The same message is clear in the parable of the prodigal son: his father had compassion on him *when he repented and came home* (Luke 15:11-32). To do otherwise would be to support the disorder, and that is NOT truly loving. So we have the teaching that "Christian prudence demands that a person's life should be carefully checked, and charity exercised accordingly" (New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine 85).

But again, back to Christmas.

There is an appearance in the literal stories in the Gospels that God sent His Son as someone separate from Himself into the world, "that the world through Him [not the Father] might be saved." But the truth is that God, being pure, unconditional love in its very essence, provided for the salvation of the world by clothing HIMSELF in the human form AS Jesus Christ so that He could *teach the truth with love* and so remove all the obstacles to a life of faith.

This is why, in perhaps the most famous Advent prophecy of all, we read, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given... and His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, *the Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*" (Isaiah 9:6). Note, He is all of these in ONE person.

This is why Jesus Himself said, "I and My Father are one" (John 10:30); "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

But how could the Infinite be contained in a finite body? And who looked after the rest of the universe while it was so contained? We might as well ask how the mind can look after the body while its thoughts are focused on one small thing. The fact is, the infinite is not contained or limited in any way, but it does manifest itself in a focused way in the love and wisdom of Christ.

The Dilemma Solved

So we see that the story of Christmas is not the story of God demanding any *thing*, least of all a human sacrifice. It is the story of love *providing* the wisdom necessary for us to take responsibility, to make good judgments, and to keep His commandments *for our own sake*, indeed, for our eternal welfare.

So it is the story of love and wisdom *working together*, as they always do, and working in this case in a human form for all to see and understand.

"I have come," Jesus said, "as a light into the world, that whoever believes in Me should not abide in darkness" (John 12:46). And "He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life" (John 8:12).

So, may this and "all your Christmases be bright" with the light of His love and wisdom!