

Communion

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[0 : 00] Exodus 34 and verses 6 and 7. But as I said last night, God gives to us a character reference.

He tells us what He Himself is like. Because no one else can give God a character reference. Only God can give Himself a character reference. And this is Him doing it. He's saying, well, I'm the governor of the universe.

I'm the Savior of Israel. And here is why I am fit to carry this responsibility. Because, Exodus 34, 6. I am the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God.

Slow to anger. Abounding in love and faithfulness. Maintaining love to thousands. And forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished.

He punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation. Now, this is God.

[1 : 12] This is God telling us His character. I said last night, this could well be one of the most important statements in the entire Bible, in the entire literature of the world, in the entire course of human history.

This statement is among the most important because it tells us about something that is more important than anything else.

And that is the character of our Creator. This is God telling us what He's like. Now, not any one of us has an absolutely and perfectly clear picture in our minds of God's character.

There isn't any single one of us who has a perfectly accurate understanding of the character of God. God's character is not just quite as you think it is.

It is not just quite as you act like it is. Because you, as a man, a woman, a child, a young person, with your own particular experiences of life, and your own particular reception of teaching throughout your life, and the examples that have been set before you, and also the choices you've made in life, they all have something to say about how you view God.

[2 : 38] And so, because we live in a world where nothing is perfect, we live in a world where particularly people are not perfect, therefore our understanding of God is not perfect.

It is distorted. For some people only a little. For others it is grotesquely distorted. But all of us have blind spots.

All of us have inaccuracies in the way that we view God. I want to spend a few minutes, first of all, describing how our view of God gets distorted.

And then I want us to come and reflect upon what God is really like. And there are three things, firstly, which I think particularly can distort our view of God.

The first one is particularly to do with our parents and our parenting, or the parenting we received when we were growing up.

[3 : 42] Because the example and the teaching of parents has more of an impact on the development of children than the example and teaching of anyone else.

And when we live in the kind of society where families are often in crisis and where the family unit is often disturbed, broken, or dysfunctional in some way, it's not surprising that children growing up in that situation gain a view of God which is not quite correct.

I think the Father in particular has an important role in this. Because God, when He becomes our God in Christ, He becomes our Father, our Heavenly Father.

And because of that, we are going to think of Him in the way that we think or thought of our earthly Father.

That's inevitable. You know, if I say Father to you, then you think of the Father that you had. Your earthly Father. And of course, for some people, your earthly Father wasn't there at all.

[5 : 14] Perhaps He died when you were very young. Perhaps He went off and left the family. Perhaps He was Himself a man with many failings and many problems.

On the other hand, perhaps He was a great Father. He was always there and He was wonderful and all your memories of Him are sweet. But if you're in that position, then believe me, you need to thank God very deeply for the wonderful privilege you've received because most people can't say that.

And many people, unfortunately, think of their fathers in a negative light. And if we think of our fathers in a negative light, then when God becomes our Father, it is difficult for us to see Him differently.

And we need to begin to learn what a good father is. We begin to need to modify our thinking. See, if your father failed you, then, as you grew up, looking around, perhaps, at friends who had good fathers, if your father failed you in some way, then it was painful to compare your dad with other of your peers' dads.

You thought to yourself, look at them, their dad's wonderful. He really cares for the family. He's there for them and he does things with them and so on. And you think, my dad isn't like that.

[6 : 41] And it hurts you. And because of that, as you grow up, as a child, you blot out that pain. You don't want that hurt. And in doing so, you're blotting out fatherhood.

And so, you're blotting out God as a father as well. I recently read a very striking and interesting book by a psychology professor in New York, a guy called Paul Vitz.

And he looks at many of the atheists who have had a significant intellectual role in the forming of Western society. And he shows how nearly every one of them had a dysfunctional father.

And that it was that dysfunctionality, that bad relationship with their father that actually led them to blotting out God in their lives and to becoming atheists. So, this is a deep, deep effect on our lives.

Who our father was and what he was like. And what we need to do when we come to God's Word is to learn accurately what a good father is like.

[7 : 52] And here it is in Exodus 34, 6 and 7. And there it is again. in the parable of the prodigal son what a good father is like.

And some of you may find that in discovering what a good father is like and you think about what your own earthly father was like, you may find that you have resentment, bitterness, even hatred towards your earthly father.

Or perhaps over particular incidents, you feel that you cannot forgive them for what they did. and you need to forgive.

You need to forgive your earthly father because you need to love your earthly father. Otherwise, you will find it psychologically very difficult to love your heavenly father.

Because there seems to be a place in our lives and in our brains for fatherhood. and if we truly love and value and cherish our earthly fathers.

[8 : 57] Or even if we have to forgive them and learn to love them. even if perhaps they're dead now and we still have to deal with that now, we still have to forgive so that we can receive the fatherhood of God.

It's very important then to recognize what I'm talking about here and if it's an issue with you to bring it before God because what you want to learn is, as I shared with the young people there, God is good.

God is good. You want always to live your life with that bedrock. God is good. You want to live your life knowing that whatever happens in your life, God is good.

Now that brings me to the second thing. Suffering. Because suffering in our lives also has an impact on the way that we view God.

Think about Job. That's the classic story of suffering in the Bible. Job experienced terrible suffering at one stage in his life.

[10 : 21] He lost his family. He lost his livelihood. He lost his wealth. He lost his health. And when his wife saw it all she said why don't you just curse God and die?

That's what she said to him. Many people have in their lives when they've suffered they've cursed God. Christians do it too.

Christians when they suffer they may not actually speak in quite as blunt a way as that but they resent God. Why is he making me suffer like this?

Why is he pursuing me and trapping me into this terrible position I'm in? Why this loss? Why this pain? Why this anguish?

Why this illness? Why this accident? Why this tragedy? Why? Why God? Why are you doing this? And when we think like that then we are judging God his character through the lens of our bitter experience.

[11 : 39] And it's inevitable that if we do it that way around as human beings we will draw conclusions about God's character which are negative. And what we have to do as Christians in order not to find ourselves bitter towards God is to try and view our sufferings from the point of view of God's character and not God's character from the point of view of our sufferings.

It's like a pair of binoculars you know if you turn them around and look with the big end to your eyes you can't see anything properly. It all looks very far away or very close I think it's very far away isn't it?

We used to do that as kids didn't we? We would put our binoculars the wrong way around and make things go far far away. God seems very far away very distant very unconcerned and uncaring cruel if we view Him through the lens of our suffering.

That's the wrong way around. When we're suffering what we need to do is to view our suffering from the point of view of God's character.

To say well I still know this He is good. I don't understand I'm ignorant of His purposes here. I don't know what outcome this will all have.

[13 : 08] I don't know how He'll sort things out on the day of judgment here. There's so many things I do not understand but I want to try and view my suffering my position just now as a man and woman who's experiencing great trauma from the point of view of the knowledge I have that God is good.

That's a discipline but it helps immensely. We should never judge God from the point of view of our sufferings saying I am suffering therefore God is bad.

That's the wrong way around. God is good therefore these sufferings have purpose. They've got meaning. They'll have a good outcome. Just as they did in Job's case. In fact James chapter 5 verse 11 James tells us about Job he says remember the suffering of Job he says and you've seen the end that the Lord intended.

And then James actually quotes from Exodus 34 the Lord is gracious and merciful. He actually quotes from this passage saying remember God's character. You see how God in his goodness worked it all out.

Job's wife couldn't see it and Job couldn't see it at times. But try and judge your suffering from the point of view of God's character. Don't see God through the filter of your suffering.

[14 : 30] And then the third thing that distorts our view of God is sin. Of course sin. Let's turn to Luke chapter 15. Luke 15.

Now here is a great place to study. You could call this the parable of the amazing father because this father in this story is obviously meant to represent to us God.

And so if you care to take Exodus 34 verses 6 and 7 and the different characteristics of God that are explained to us there and compare them with this father you'll find they're all here.

This father the father of these two sons is a godlike father. Now we read in verse 13 that the younger son set off from the father's house.

He left his father. Why? Has he not understood? Why does he want to leave this kind of father?

[15 : 50] Why does he not want to stay with the father? as would have been expected in the family roles of that society? Why does he not want to stay and be part of the family?

Why? Because he cannot see the character of his dad. And he can't see the character of his dad because he is wanting to live in a way that his father can never approve of.

he wants to go to experience the wild living. And he's tried it at home probably. He's tried to come home worse for the wear.

He's had too many banned substances in his blood. He's brought some people of dubious reputation into the house and his father has said, son, I'm sorry, you can't do that here, son.

And the younger son resents his father. He resents that his father, in Exodus 34 terms, cannot clear the guilty.

[17 : 02] He can't just pretend that it's alright for his son to live as he's living because he knows it's not. He is a good father. And so the younger son resents the character of his dad.

We might study in the evening, I'm not sure, but we might come to the older son and we'll see he does the same thing in a different way. He also resents the character of his dad. He has a different kind of sin, but they both have sin and sin stops them from seeing clearly the character of their father.

And so you can imagine the young son with his friends, he says, my old man, you see my old man, he won't let me do anything. And he feels claustrophobic in his father's household because there's lots of things he's set his heart on sinfully.

And he's not allowed to do them at home. And so he says, well, there's nothing for it. I've got to leave my father and I've got to go where I can do those things uninterrupted. And that's what he does.

But it's his sin that is the problem. It's not the father. It's not the father's character. I think, for example, of Aberdeen, I suppose, many of you live in close proximity to your neighbors.

[18 : 24] And imagine one day you think, well, my garden's not big enough. I think I'll just knock down the fence and I'll take a wee bit of my neighbor's garden because I quite fancy having some vegetables and he's got a nice bit and I'll do that.

So you do that. You knock down the fence and you start planting your vegetables and your neighbor comes in and he comes out and he says, what do you think you're doing? He says, well, I just wanted a bit of your land.

And he says, you can't do that. I'm sorry. And so you go off to your friends and you say, see, my neighbor, he's really unreasonable. He won't let me have a bit of his garden.

Well, who's being unreasonable in that situation? Is it your neighbor? Or is it you? And that's the nature of sin, you see. You go off and slander your neighbor's character because you want to do something that is wrong.

And he doesn't want you to do it. And that's what we do with God. if you've got any habit in your life just now that is contrary to God's will for your life.

[19 : 35] If you get any sin that you cherish which you know God as Father cannot condone and so long as you live in it you know that he cannot fully bless your life.

then so long as you hold to that sin there will be a little part of you which resents God. He won't let me do this.

And which therefore casts aspersions in your mind on the character of God. That is what sin does. Sin makes us feel that we cannot abide the character of God.

Which is obviously why as Christians we need to review always our lives and say if there is anything in me Lord Psalm 1 see if there is any unrighteous way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.

Please Father let there be nothing in me that makes me say you God are not letting me do this and I resent you for it. Let there be nothing like that. May I be able to look up to you and see that you approve of every area of my life.

[20 : 53] That you delight in me just as the Lord Jesus could look up to heaven and hear a voice coming from heaven saying you are my beloved son and with you I am well pleased.

To be able to do that is only possible if we are determined to be clear of sin in our lives. then we are fully in tune with the character of God and then we can see him clearly and nothing distorts or eclipses his face from our vision.

so you can see why all of us have our blind spots and our distortions when it comes to seeing God clearly and seeing his character clearly.

But how then can any of us ever really come to know him as he is? To know him truly? To be intimate with him? And to delight in him? The way we saw on Friday night Jesus delighted in his father.

Remember it says he rejoiced with a great joy full of the Holy Spirit and he says I thank you father Lord of heaven and earth for what you do. What is your good pleasure is my good pleasure Jesus said.

[22 : 15] How can we ever come to that place? Well it says in verse 17 of the parable says he came to his senses and he said you know back home there you don't even need to be a son to be treated well by my dad.

Even the least even the day hired servants the lowest not even the permanent employees but the guys he just brings on when there's a bit of extra work to be done on the farm even these guys get treated well by my dad.

He says I'd be happy even to be one of them compared to this feeding pigs I'd be happy just to be one of them. And you see in his mind he's beginning to make concessions to the way his father sees things.

He's saying well maybe he's not quite so bad after all. Maybe he's got a point. Maybe he's right. And it's when we begin to do that in our minds that we can begin to correct the distortions that are in our minds about God's character.

See our wrong view of God will always take us to a place of unhappiness. That's what happens if you get a wrong view of God. It will take you to a place of unhappiness.

[23 : 44] Like God is unreasonable to forbid me this pleasure and so you rebound off God into that pleasure and it's sin.

And you get what you want but in doing so you're far from God and in doing so you discover that sin is addictive. That sin is destructive.

And so it begins to corrode at your character. It begins to impinge on your freedom. It begins to rob you. And you're in a place of unhappiness through it.

And then you begin to think well actually maybe God had a point. Maybe he was right. And it's that sort of concession to God.

It's that kind of willingness to reconsider and to think that God actually has got it right and you've got it wrong. that's when people turn to God. That's when things begin to move spiritually.

[24 : 52] And it's true whether you're not a Christian today and you need to see for the first time that where you and God disagree God will be right and you'll be wrong every time.

And when you begin to see that and begin to say yes I'm wrong he's right that's when you can begin to discover God's goodness in Jesus Christ and can begin to find out what really being a Christian means and would mean for yourself and begin to actually perhaps experience it.

But as Christians too there are dysfunctions in our relationship with God and it's always because we're in the wrong and he's right and we're resenting him being right and what we need to do is recognize that we are wrong and come to our senses as it says here when we do come we find something that we lost sight of altogether we find the goodness of God's character because this young man returns to home and the father's waiting for him sees him coming and filled with compassion remember that's the first word in God's character reference the word compassion he's moved inwardly that's what it means he's moved inwardly he runs to the son and throws his arms around him and kisses him and he says well

I really want you to come home looking like you never left I want you to be absolutely assured that it's just like you've never been away I forgive you completely I completely reinstate you into your position as my son so let's get this pig swill spattered mucky cloak off you let's get the best clothes let's get a ring let's get the sandals let's fill up that wasted body of yours with the fattened calf let's feed let's eat let's celebrate and you see this small concession of the son beginning to think maybe dad's right it just opens the door to a flood of revelation of the father's character to him and he sees mercy and grace abundant he sees what moises was shown by god in exodus 34 he sees the character of a good father the character of god now as i was saying last night in exodus 34 if you're determined to hold on to sin in your life you will meet that part of god's character described in exodus 34 verse 7 that god and the authorized version puts it i think helpfully does not clear the guilty he doesn't clear the guilty he can't brush sin under the carpet and say it doesn't matter he can't do that and so you'll meet that in your life if you're determined to go your way and it's a way that is wrong then you'll meet that you'll meet that god cannot clear the guilty and as long as you keep going that way you will keep experiencing that aspect of god's character i'm sorry i can't condone that i cannot let you go that way as though it is right but as soon as we begin to turn to god's way and as soon as we accept his way is right then we meet like this enormous welcoming mat if you like a welcome mat to heaven heaven's door and it's written large with the character of god we meet compassion god says i'm really sorry for the way that your sin has wasted your life and i'm i'm grieving that it's brought you to this he's compassionate towards us he is gracious he deals with us not as we deserve he doesn't say our son i told you so before you left home you should have listened to me he doesn't say that he says son i love you and you know i don't need to tell you that you don't deserve this and he doesn't he doesn't bring up our sins and keep visiting them again and again and keep worrying us about them and keep condemning us for them he is gracious filled with grace filled with favor undeserved and we discover this great welcome merciful compassionate gracious slow to anger you're not you're not angry with me father son my anger is gone that's isaiah 12 verse 1 isn't it you were angry with me but your anger is taken away how does it go there let me just read it to you yeah isaiah 12 i will praise you o lord although you were angry with me your anger has turned away and you have comforted me slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness faithfulness is

about god continuing his relationship with us even though we've done many things to break it he's faithful and forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin remember how great our sin can be and god still can forgive it he forgives wickedness rebellion and sin exodus 34 verse 7 says isn't that wonderful so there's this enormous welcome as soon as we want to come back to god from our determination to rebel against him which has distorted his character in our minds and made us resentful of it once we're willing to come back then we're no longer spoiling our view of god by our own willfulness we see him more clearly again what a welcome what a god what a father what compassion what grace what mercy and now at last the younger son really knows his father it's interesting to think about how exodus 34 or why exodus 34 is phrased the way it is because john in his letter first letter just says god is love and really god could have spoken in that way god is love but i think exodus 34 is given in the way it is because it's to encourage people who are far from god in sin that they can return so you remember the whole context is of law giving it's exodus it's the giving of the law in sin what happens if we break the law is it all over between us and god no says god because i am compassionate and gracious slow to anger abounding in love and faithfulness maintaining love to thousands forgiving wickedness rebellion and sin and you see the encouragement that you have if you've broken the law and you feel i've really messed up my chances with god god says no look at who i am my character and come back the lord's table is all about that we're coming to that part of the service in a minute there's a well known story from the highlands it's often repeated and i won't go into the details you've probably heard it but it's just just about a woman who was very hesitant about coming to the lord's table she was clearly a christian and the minister said to her she wondered whether she could take the cup and the bread he said take it woman it's for sinners and that is what god's character does for us it encourages us that we can come to him as sinners as people who have broken that beautiful law that he has given us which is meant to bless our lives in close fellowship with him that we can come back to him and that we can be received by him welcomed by him and today welcomed by him at his table even though we know that our lives are not as they should be before him welcomed forgiven reinstated so my friends please consider whatever it is in your life that distorts your view of god if anything that i've said today has spoken to your heart and helped you to see well actually that's me that's where i am just now then there is nothing more important for

[34 : 33] you than that you should see god clearly that you should see his character clearly that will be your greatest happiness that will be your deepest joy your most wonderful blessing so don't let anything distort his face don't let anything warp the way that you view him deal with it deal with it before him and remember he is the compassionate and the gracious one and you can come to him when you come to your senses and he will welcome you and he will receive you it you the listening