

THE
CROSS
OF CHRIST

God's Work for Us

GEORGE R. KNIGHT



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Dedicated to

Gil and Gail Valentine

special people who are devoted to Christ and His cross

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My Problem With God

Reading certain parts of the Bible makes me mad! Take that story of the prodigal son. The first time I read it I almost quit the Bible altogether. After all, it obviously comes to the wrong conclusion. Let me illustrate.

An Upsetting Bible Story

The story of the prodigal occurs in Luke 15—a chapter that deals with three kinds of lostness.

The parable of the lost sheep represents people who are lost through their own foolishness. They get lost because they don't watch where they are going. Sheep know they are lost, but aren't sure what to do about it.

The parable of the lost coin pictures those lost through no particular fault of their own. In fact, they don't even know they are lost. Sheep have a little spiritual sense (enough to know they are lost), but coins lack spiritual sense altogether.

The parable of the lost son presents a totally different picture. His is a story of willful disobedience and *rebellion*. He deliberately schemes to get lost. Sick and tired of the old man's rules and restrictions, he *orders* his father to give him his share of the inheritance. No sooner does he get the money than he heads to "a far country" where he can cut loose and live it up without having to feel guilty around his father.

The son differs from the coin in that he recognizes that he is lost. And unlike the sheep he knows how to get home. The whole point of the contrast in the three parables is that the son is *glad to be lost*. The last thing on his mind is to go home. After all, he is on the road to freedom.

This differing nature of the lostness of the son points to an interesting aspect of God's love. When the sheep and coin were lost, someone conducted a diligent search to find them. But when the son was lost, the father did not use his many servants to restrain him. Neither did he search

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after him. On the contrary, when the boy demanded his inheritance, the father gave it to him.

Now, it seems to me that a son is more valuable than a coin or a sheep. Why, then, was there no search? The answer lies in the nature of the son's lostness. His is a case of high-handed rebellion, not one of weakness or ignorance. The young man rejoiced in living the lost life, and the father was wise enough to realize that love cannot be forced. The wisest course was to let his son experience his rebellion and reap the results.

That, as you will recall, is exactly what happened. The Bible says that the son went to a far country, where he spent his father's money in "loose living." But things went wrong, and we soon find the young fellow drooling over swine's slop.

At that point he "came to himself" and decided to head back home. Perhaps, he mused, he could *work* there as a hired servant, since he was "no longer worthy" to be a son. The father, of course, would have none of that. He ran out and conferred full sonship on the repentant son. Then he threw a big party to celebrate the young man's return.

So far, so good. Up to this point in my first reading of the parable, I was still somewhat in harmony with its general lesson. But then I came to the airtight logic of the older son and began to see the unfairness in the father's approach.

Put yourself in the firstborn's shoes. He had been a faithful worker on the family ranch (all of which was now a part of his personal inheritance, since his younger brother had cashed in his share). His life had been tolerable, but not particularly pleasant.

Heading back to the house with dirt under his fingernails and sheep manure on his sandals, he suddenly hears the sounds of the party—all of it being paid for by his hard work. Inquiring as to the occasion, he comes face to face with a personal injustice.

His anger, it seemed to me, was more than justified. From a human point of view the older son had a good case. *This young degenerate, after all, has spent his share of the inheritance, and now he comes home to spend mine,* he thought. *And why rejoice because he has come back home? What else could he have done? He was broke, destitute, and starving!*

The father, of course, went out to his older son to explain, but the rationale must have seemed weak at best. After all, the older son had shown heroic moral fortitude. He had laboriously kept the father's rule and law for his entire life. "I didn't like it," he cried to his father, "but I did it anyway. I would have liked to have drunk it up and chased around with wild

women like your other son, but I kept your stinking commandments and worked like a dog. And look who gets a party!” he wailed in self-pity (see verses 29, 30).

The reading of Luke 15 upset my moral sensibilities. An obvious injustice had taken place. Neither son got what he deserved. And isn’t getting what one deserves a basic principle of justice?

I might have read the chapter “properly” if I had been raised as a Christian. But as a 19-year-old agnostic, my mind had not been indoctrinated into viewing the story in a certain way. Instead, I merely read the words for what they said—and went away questioning God’s justice.

I had yet to learn that His justice and human justice are not the same; that divine love and human love are qualitatively different; and that normal people give others what they *deserve*, but that God always presents them with what they *need*.

But is that fair? Is it just? Is God really divvying up the rewards properly?

More Perturbing Stories

Those questions bring us to Matthew 20 and the parable of unjust rewards. You will recall that Jesus told a story about an employer who hired workers at the beginning of the day and promised them a day’s wage. Later he went out and hired more laborers, going back to find still more each hour until the eleventh hour of the 12-hour workday.

It is the way that Jesus told the story that particularly upset me. He has the employer line up the workers in exactly the reverse order of how he had hired them. Then, in full view of the others, the employer pays those who worked only one hour a full day’s pay.

Now what do you think went on in the minds of those who had spent the whole day on the job? They started multiplying. Anyone who has worked on fruit farms or in construction knows how the laborer’s mind operates. “If those guys get one day’s pay for one hour’s work,” so the logic runs, “we deserve 12 days’ pay—that is, two weeks’ earnings if you subtract out the Sabbaths. At last,” they rejoiced, “we have discovered an employer who will allow us to get ahead.”

Then came the bombshell. All received exactly the same pay! No wonder they grumbled. I was a young construction worker when I first read Matthew 20, and I grumbled with them. To me it was a travesty of justice.

My discovery that Jesus told the parable of the employer in Matthew

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20 as a direct response to a question set forth by the disciples in Matthew 19:27 did not help assuage my rebellious feelings.

In that verse, in the wake of the refusal of the rich young ruler to leave all for Christ, Peter asked Jesus what he and the other disciples would get, since they had “left everything and followed” Him. Jesus responded in chapter 20 that they would receive no more than those who come into the kingdom at the last hour.

Once again I found myself face to face with the justice of God, and He wasn’t coming out too shiny in my secular mind. I had still not grasped that God’s love and justice differ from human love and justice. In our natural state, we hand people what they *deserve*, but God gives them what they *need*.

The basis of human justice is what the Romans called *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation, the law of the claw, an eye for an eye, a good for a good. People get what they deserve.

On the other hand, the basis of God’s justice is what Paul called *grace*. The simplest definition of grace is unmerited favor. In other words, *grace means that people receive what they do not deserve*.

The whole concept of grace ought to raise questions about God’s justice, especially if people are not getting their proper reward after striving so hard for it. Such a situation could make a person feel downright hateful.

The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 also raises sticky questions about divine justice. A reader can hardly miss the element of surprise in that great judgment parable. And one doesn’t have to read the story too many times to discover that the Pharisees end up on the wrong side of the judgment.

The reader must keep in mind that the Pharisees had dedicated their entire lives to keeping every jot and tittle of God’s law. They had a saying that Messiah (Christ) would come if Israel kept Torah (the law) perfectly for one day.¹ Thus they totally dedicated their lives to bringing about that day. As a result, they paid as tithe every tenth leaf of their garden herbs, would never touch an unclean thing, and had scores of laws on Sabbath observance in the belief that such external acts would be the standard of God’s judgment.

But then at the “last trump,” the parable runs, the Pharisees discover to their disgust that God was not playing the game according to their rules. The Lord was more concerned with the inward condition of their hearts as expressed in serving other people in disinterested love than He was in “sinless perfection.” Their outward acts of Sabbathkeeping, carefulness

with foods, and scrupulous tithing were important, of course, but only within the context of reflecting Christ's character of love and personal "caringness." That concrete, caring personalness, Jesus implied in Matthew 25, was the "one point" upon which the judgment turned.² As a result, a whole lot of people who did not measure up to the Pharisees' high moral standards entered the kingdom, while many of the Pharisees found themselves left on the outside.

That parable is scarcely one to encourage those who have dedicated their entire lives to obeying God's law down to its minutest point. In my mind's eye, I can see many of those listening to Christ questioning the justice of such a judgment scene. It was hardly the type of story engineered to bring people into line through wielding a "straight testimony." I imagine that many of His hearers must have grumbled because He was overturning the "old ways." And, they must have queried, "What kind of weak-kneed, namby-pamby kingdom could possibly arise from such teachings?"

In my first reading of Matthew 25 I had many of those feelings. How could anyone measure "squishy" standards like love? The Pharisees had something solid and ought to be rewarded accordingly. Grace—giving people what they don't deserve—could be the world's most dangerous teaching. Could God's basis of judgment really be trusted?

Other Bible passages that early led me to question God's justice were Genesis 4:1-7 and Romans 9:14-18.

The conclusion to the Cain and Abel episode particularly caught me by surprise. Coming into Christianity at that time through the Adventist gate, I thought for certain that vegetables had to be better than blood. God's recognition of Abel's offering seemed arbitrary at best. I didn't know it at the time, but I was coming to grips with the symbolism of one of the most unpopular teachings in Christian history—the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. At any rate, the whole event left me with more questions about God than answers.

Romans 9:14-18 provided me with a different set of problems. In verse 15 Paul quoted God as saying, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." The apostle then turned around in verses 17 and 18 and said that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart so that He could demonstrate His power. "Who," I queried to myself, "is this God whom we are supposed to love? On what grounds can He save some and destroy others? Is the divine nature basically unjust and arbitrary? Can God really be trusted?"

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Such were some of the questions of a 19-year-old first-time reader of the Bible. The issue of God's justice, of course, is not just a problem in the Bible. We face it in the daily world around us.

What Kind of God Would Create Our Kind of World?

One of the most unforgettable experiences in my life took place in 1968 in Galveston, Texas, where I pastored the local Adventist church. One morning I received a long-distance call asking me to visit a West Coast patient who recently had been admitted into the nationally recognized University of Texas Medical School's burn clinic.

I was little prepared for what I found when I arrived. My first glimpse of the patient found me staring at a 2-year-old toddler. The child was feeding himself by holding a spoon between the two largest toes of its right foot. You see, this baby had no arms. A closer look helped me realize the extent of his injuries. Frightfully burned at the age of 1, he had no lips, just teeth; no ears; no eyelids; and no hair.

I had come to encourage the mother, but in total emotional disarray I retreated to the hallway, where the mother found me and sought to comfort me somehow. Even after 40 years, tears fill my eyes when that image comes to mind.

What kind of a world do we live in? I, conceivably, could have understood it if one of my parishioners or even I had been so mutilated, because we had developed ugly traits of character, and, one could argue, "deserved it." But what justification was there for the suffering of an innocent child? What kind of a hellish planet do we live on? Where is the so-called God of love?

"Is He," asks Philip Yancey, "the cosmic Sadist who delights in watching us squirm?"³

The experience of the burned child is repeated millions of times each year. Such is the injustice at the microcosmic, individual level. But the problem has also macrocosmic aspects. Whole groups of people suffer in Auschwitzes and Buchenwalds and through Hiroshimas and Nagasakis. Nearly everyone is aware that Adolf Hitler's "final solution" to bring about his millennial Third Reich caused the cold-blooded destruction of 6 million Jews, but they generally forget or overlook that the same program took the lives of 600,000 Gypsies and more than 6 million Slavs. Yet even Hitler's achievements stand in the shadow of Joseph Stalin's accomplishment in eliminating up to 50 million of his own people, a story excruciatingly documented in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's massive three-volume *Gulag Archipelago*.

No wonder the book of Revelation has the souls under the altar cry out with a loud voice: “O Sovereign Lord, . . . how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” (Rev. 6:10).

How long, O Lord, how long? If God is all-wise and all-powerful, why doesn’t He clean up this mess? “Behold, I come quickly” (Rev. 22:7, KJV) is the reply, but after 2,000 years one wonders what “quickly” means. For century after century it seems as if the lid has popped off of hell.

Can we trust a God who allows the world to get into such a botched-up state? And how would you feel if the “God of surprises” ended up giving Hitler or Stalin or some mass murderer what he doesn’t deserve—grace—in the final judgment?

Distrust of God Is Central to Scripture

My personal questions about God, the Bible, and the everyday world are not unique. Doubt and distrust stand at the very foundation of the human predicament, as reflected in Eve’s experience recorded in Genesis 3. Verse 1 plainly states that Satan was “more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made.” Satan never came up to Eve and announced himself as the devil, who intended to deceive her. Rather, he insidiously sowed doubts in her mind. “Did God say . . . ?” was his first point of attack with Eve.

He uses the same tactic today. If he can get us to doubt God’s word (*if* He really said it), he has won the battle. Failing at that point, the enemy sought to convince Eve that God didn’t really mean what He said (“You will not die”). Satan’s third tactic was to get Eve to question God’s goodness and positive intentions toward her, insinuating that He did not want her to partake of the fruit because He was trying to keep the best things for Himself—in other words, that God is essentially selfish (Gen. 3:5, 6).

Satan’s aim with both Eve and us is to sow distrust and doubt. Eve’s distrust led her to rebel against God. As a result, she chose her will rather than His, and then put her will into action by eating the forbidden fruit. Sin occurred first in her mind. Afterward it became an outward act. Eve’s “children” have been doubting God ever since. Distrust of God stands at the very foundation of the sin crisis.

But such distrust is more than just an earthbound problem. For that reason, Paul can speak of “the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12) and the need for God “to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven,” to Himself (Col. 1:20, NEB).