

Do You Know My Jesus? Part 4

What Exactly is God's Wrath?

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April 2, 2023 | danielr.net | northbroadal.com

God is Love

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love
is from God; everyone who loves is born of
God and knows God. (1 John 4:7)*

I want you to know who Jesus is. Hopefully, after the last three weeks of considering the beauty of the relationship between the Father and the Son, the table-flipping actions of love demonstrated by Jesus, and the compassion of God, you are starting to know Jesus as I know him. Even if you already know Jesus, I hope that these lessons at least help us see who Jesus is more clearly than we knew him before we began this series.

Today's sermon is one of the toughest of the series because we will be talking about the wrath of God. The title of the sermon, *What Exactly is God's Wrath?*, is meant to be almost a joke or perhaps a commentary on how these sermons typically go.

The truth is that God's ways are beyond finding out as Paul says in Romans 11:33. There are lots of good people in the world who serve as teachers and ministers that suggest through their teaching that what they are saying about God's wrath, heaven, hell, and other difficult subjects is actually how things are...is exactly how things are. When I would speak about these things in the past, I didn't title the sermons like I have today, but that is the message I was communicating.

Today, though, I'm approaching this subject with a huge dose of humility. I will not be telling you what exactly God's wrath is because I nor no one else can perfectly explain it, but I will be doing my best to tell you what I *think* that it is, and I do this with a great deal of hesitancy

because I don't want you to get the impression that I have all the answers on this complicated subject, which has been debated since the New Testament was completed.

But one thing that I am certain of and **can** be exact about is that God is love. There is nothing that anyone can do to change my mind on this one crucial fact. And because of that, I am convinced that any act or attribute of God must be consistent with this one truth: God is love. As Paul told the Galatians, if you hear me, an angel from heaven, or any other person try to tell you something about God that does not fit within the idea that God is love, then that teaching is to be rejected as a different gospel and a different version of the Father of Jesus.

So, God's wrath, God's righteousness, God's justice, and God's judgment must all be consistent with this sacred, wonderful, seemingly impossible, and amazing truth that God is love. And because of this, the only way that I can possibly define wrath, and this is not original to me, is that God's wrath is God's love wrongly received or we might even say that it is what happens when we reject God's love.

God's Love Wrongly Received

*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge
God, God gave them over to an unfit mind
and to do things that should not be done.
(Romans 1:28)*

In Romans 1, Paul writes that God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and injustice. He says that God's wrath is revealed because humanity, despite being given the chance to know God, has rejected God's wisdom since the beginning. Not only that, but humanity is typically ungrateful to God, so they exchanged the glory of God for the glory of things that are corruptible. "Therefore," Paul says, "God gave them over..." The wrath of God, then, is when God gives someone over to the path that they have chosen. When someone rejects the way of God, they miss out on the peace that passes understanding, the everlasting joy found in Christ, and the feeling of God's love in every aspect of their life.

Understanding God's wrath is more about a healthy respect and appreciation for the Way of Christ as the objectively best way to live, not about scaring people into faith or guilt people into a fear-based obedience. Let's start with a story.

Just last week, Cayden was standing beside the bathroom door while Laura was getting ready. He had one hand on the door frame where the hinges are, his hand right where the door

would close. He told his mommy that he was going to shut the door, and she pointed out that if he did, he would smash his fingers in the door. She told him to take his fingers out first and then shut the door.

He looked right at her and shut the door anyway.

That's when he felt the wrath of Laura.

Laura didn't yell at him or spank him. She didn't put him into timeout or take away a toy. Instead, she got down on her knees and hugged him while he cried and cried. She gave him kisses on his hand and forehead. And slowly the tears stopped.

Laura saw that he was making a bad choice, explained to him the consequence of his actions, and she asked him to take his fingers out of the crack between the door and the frame, but he closed it anyway.

The pain he felt when the door closed on his fingers is how I would describe God's wrath. God's wrath is God's love wrongly received. God's wrath is what happens when we reject instruction that God has lovingly provided us with. Let's look at two examples of this. Then we'll talk about fear and death.

The prodigal son from Luke 15 is an easy parable to read and understand because of its familiarity to us as well as its simplicity. We looked at it last week when we considered the compassion of God and the compassion we are to show to our neighbors who are spiritually needy. This week, we're going to look at the wrath of the father in Luke 15 in two different instances: his wrath towards the younger son and his wrath towards the older son.

Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the wealth that will belong to me.' So he divided his assets between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant region, and there he squandered his wealth in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that region, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that region, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' "

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and

kissed him. Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:11–24)

The father says the son was dead. How was he dead? James describes this process as fourfold: desire, temptation, sin, and then death, which is separation from the Father. The son desired his father’s wealth so that he could live like he wanted. Having secured the wealth, he went far away from his father’s house and wasted it away; this is when he “died” in the story. At the lowest point in his life, he comes to his senses, prepares a speech, and comes back to his father’s house. His assumption is that he is no longer worthy to be his father’s son, but the father’s compassion compels him to celebrate his son’s resurrection.

The younger son’s pitiful existence in Luke 15 is the wrath of the father. The father did not object to the son’s request just like God does not force us to follow him. God lets us go into the far country in hopes that, after we see the futility of that kind of living, we will come back home where he is waiting with open arms, not even wanting to hear our excuses. The father loved the son, but his love was rejected. The wrath of God is God’s love wrongly received.

Now, let’s turn our attention to the older son.

“Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your assets with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’ ” (Luke 15:25–32)

That last line of the father stands out to me: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.” Yet, despite all of this, the love of the father had not transformed the older son. He was bitter, jealous, and he refuses to call the other son his brother. He, too, is in a pitiful condition. Though he is on the farm, he still finds himself laboring away like a slave, having

never disobeyed the father. You know, those of us who have spent our whole lives trying so hard to follow all of the rules find it exceedingly difficult to embrace the freedom that is in Christ. We simply can't accept the fact that "all things belong" to us as Paul told the church at Corinth.

We live our lives in fear. We live our lives not being able to dance and sing to the music of God. And we find ourselves judging others who, despite their mistakes, have discovered the grace and mercy of God in all of its abundance.

Despite living in God's house and following all of the rules, we feel more like we are in hell than in the house of God. And God allows us to go down this path of bondage if we so choose. God's wrath is God's love wrongly received.

A Spirit of Fear and Bondage

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!"
Romans 8:15

Let's talk more about this fear and how it leads to death. In Luke 19, Jesus tells a story about some servants who were entrusted a portion of their master's possessions. Two of them used the money they were allotted to increase their master's wealth. The last servant said, "Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit and reap what you did not sow" (Luke 19:20–21). This is how many Christians have been taught to view God too. But notice what the master says to the servant: "I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew, did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow?" (Luke 19:22).

Christians need to be careful of being judged by their own words. As Jesus said, we will be judged by the judgment with which we judge others. Sometimes, we judge ourselves too harshly too. In Romans 7, Paul describes a situation that many Christians can unfortunately relate to.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. (Romans 7:14–20)

We feel this way because we do not understand God's grace. Like the man in the parable above, we have an unhealthy view of God, and this view of God leads us into a miserable state. Notice what Paul says next:

Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am enslaved to the law of God, but with my flesh I am enslaved to the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. (Romans 7:24–8:2)

If you, as a Christian, have been set free from the law of sin and death, why do you still have the anxiety that Paul displays in Romans 7? He was talking about life under the Law. We aren't under the Law, we are under grace. Why, then, do we still needlessly torture ourselves? Because we do not know God's grace. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, so let's stop living miserable lives and having the attitude of the older son in the parable from Luke 15 because God has not given us a spirit of fear or a spirit of bondage!

This other gospel, as Paul called it in Galatians 1, is one I used to preach, and it leads one into this way of negative thinking, and Paul said that this way is cursed and it causes one to fall from grace, which is another way of talking about the wrath of God. The freedom and liberty in Christ, however, which causes us to express our faith in love, leads us to life, joy, and peace in the Holy Spirit. If we want to go down this path of bondage, then God will allow us because God's wrath is God's love wrongly received.

Before we bring this to a close, I want to point out one more passage:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. (1 John 4:18)

I pray that my sermon on God's wrath has helped you to cast out fear that you may be holding on to. I want all of my sermons to display the perfect love of God because God is love. Even God's wrath is an extension of God's love. We haven't had the time this morning to talk about a lot of what you might be interested in when it comes to God's wrath, such as the afterlife. But I tend to think that if we can have a healthy appreciation and respect for God's wrath in this life, then we don't have anything at all to worry about and can stand before God in complete confidence since there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.