

2018-03-18 “The Matter of the Heart” – Michael Cheuk  
Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33; Jeremiah 31:31-34

I was several weeks into my first semester of seminary when my mom called to say that my dad had suffered a major heart attack. Several arteries were blocked, and the surgeon had to go in, not once, but twice, to perform bypass surgeries. My dad spent over three weeks in intensive care, and more weeks in recovery. Every weekend, I drove from Ft. Worth to Shreveport to spend time with my dad and my family. In the end, my dad made it through. My family was so grateful to the surgeon. She tirelessly and fiercely operated on my dad. She also calmly and compassionately walked with us through this traumatic time.

The heart is a vitally important organ in the human body that literally determines life and death. Medically speaking, as long as the heart keeps pumping, even though the brain stops functioning, that person is still considered alive. When the heart stops beating, a person is declared dead.

Today, I want to talk about a vitally important doctrine that is at the heart of Christianity. I want to talk about our understanding of how Jesus “saves” us, and how that understanding can either be life-giving or not. As someone who was raised in evangelical churches and seminary, I’ve been taught a particular theory about how Jesus saves, and it goes something like this:

*God is a God of love. But when it comes to our “salvation,” God is God of holiness and justice. God has a law (the Ten Commandments) given to Moses. God made a covenant (like a treaty or contract) with God’s people at Mt. Sinai that stipulated all the things we have to do and not do in order to be in good standing with God. Unfortunately, we all have broken this covenant. We all have sinned. We all have transgressed God’s law. As a result, we deserve punishment. So imagine a courtroom, at the end of time, where God sits as the divine Judge, Jury, and Executioner all rolled into one. We are summoned into this courtroom, where God pronounces us guilty, and sentences us to everlasting punishment. It is a grim picture of a grim future.*

*Yet, there’s hope! For those who believe in Jesus Christ, Jesus enters the courtroom to take that death sentence from us. Jesus takes the punishment away from us and absorbs it himself. God the Father exhausts His wrath and satisfies His retributive, punitive justice with the crucifixion of Jesus, His Son. Because of that, God moves us from the category of a damned sinner to the category of a child of God, worthy of divine love, forgiveness, mercy and grace.*

Does anyone here recognize this understanding of “salvation”? This understanding is called the “penal substitutionary theory of atonement.” It is “penal” just as we describe the penal justice system – relating to a penalty for breaking the law. It is “substitutionary” because Jesus substitutes Himself for us, and thus, we are saved from God’s wrath. It is Jesus and not us who bear the brunt of God’s wrathful punishment so that we can be “atoned” or be at one with God. This is one theory, and I would say, the predominate theory, of how most evangelical Christians understand how we can be at one with God.

And yet, more and more evangelical Christians are having difficulty with this theory. For one, this theory’s main metaphor is based upon an intrinsically adversarial image of a courtroom with

God as the Judge. Is the default attitude of God towards human beings adversarial? Also, it sees divine judgement as based on punishment ... locking up sinners forever in everlasting torment. God's wrath is directed toward our whole person and identity...we are guilty sinners at the hands of an angry God. As such, the motivation for us to become "saved" is less likely based on love, but more likely based on fear. "Salvation" is understood more as avoiding death and punishment than being drawn to a fullness and abundance of life.

Imagine a child coming home from school and showing a failing grade on a test. How should a parent respond that would motivate the child to do better? A parent could say: "What a terrible grade! What are you, stupid or lazy?" Or how about, "How can you make this bad grade? Don't you know hard I'm working and sacrificing for you to go to school?" Or "That's a terrible grade! Go to your room without supper! You are grounded until you improve your grade!"

Imagine you were that child, what might be going on in your heart right now toward your parent? Is your heart softening or hardening? Are you feeling gratitude or resentment? Will you more likely to respond with love, or with fear, guilt, and anger?

Now imagine the same scenario, but with a different response from the parent. Having seen the 'F' on the child's test, the parent says, "Oh! I'm sorry to see this 'F'! I'm worried. Would you be willing to help me understand what happened?" Then later, the parent says, "This is not who you are. What can we do to help you do better next time?"

Imagine you were THAT child, what might be going on in your heart right now toward your parent? Is your heart softening or hardening? Are you feeling gratitude or resentment? Will you more likely respond with love, or with fear, guilt, and anger?

Can you feel the difference in your heart between a parent who is adversarial and a parent who seeks to connect and understand? Can you feel the difference in your heart between a parent who does things *to* you and a parent who seeks to do things *with* you?

Historians of Christian theology tell us that before people came up with the penal substitutionary theory of atonement, many of the early Church Fathers understood how Jesus saves in a very different way. Those early Christian thinkers from the fourth century say that Jesus became human and shared in our broken human nature so that we can share in his *healed* human nature. God in Jesus takes upon himself the *disease* of sin so that we might be *healed* from sin.

Instead of using the image of an adversarial legal courtroom between a Divine Judge and a guilty human being, those early Christian theologians were influenced more by the image of Jesus as *the Great Physician*. Jesus, when asked why he ate with tax collectors and sinners, said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mark 2:17). Those early theologians understood God as the Creator who made human beings as a masterpiece of art: "We are God's workmanship," says Paul in Ephesians. Yes, sin did enter the world, but sin was understood as a sickness, a plague that crippled humanity eventually leading to death. But because God loves humanity and the world, God throughout history has been working to heal that sickness, even to the point of sending Jesus to be our Great Physician.

A doctor works *with* a sick patient for the healing of the patient. Is there judgment? Absolutely. Judgment is required for the proper diagnosis of the life threatening disease. Judgment is required for the proper choice of treatment. The doctor's "wrath," so to speak, is directed not toward the patient, but toward the virus, the cancer, the obstruction of the arteries, the disease, for the purpose of driving it out and bringing life and wholeness back to the patient.

Do doctors give laws and commands? In a way, yes. They prescribe medication with precise instructions. They prescribe exercises and therapies. They dictate rules regulating what one should and shouldn't eat, drink, or smoke. If we don't follow the doctor's prescriptions, we are only hurting ourselves and sabotaging our own healing. However, the doctor works with us to get buy-in, so that we take responsibility to partner with the physician in our own healing.

Therefore, with *this* understanding of how Jesus saves, Jesus is not the substitutionary victim of God's wrath upon human beings. No, with this ancient understanding, Jesus is the *instrument* of God's healing. With this understanding, God's love is directed towards us as whole human beings. God's wrath is directed towards those things that damage us, that bring destruction and death. When we sin, God our heavenly Father tells us: "Beloved child, I made you in my image. You are beautiful in my sight. This is not who you are. Follow my way toward Healing and Life. Then you will be at one with me."

In our Old Testament reading from Jeremiah 31, God tells God's people that even though they broke the covenant from Mt. Sinai, God was not giving up on them. Even though the Israelites broke the law of God, that's not who they are. "The day is coming," says the LORD, "when I am going to write the law onto their hearts. I will be their God, and they shall be my people."

For God, the heart of the matter is not some external law imposed on God's people, enforced by the threat of punishment. No, for God, the heart of the matter ... is the matter of the heart ... ours and God's. God wants to perform heart surgery on us so that we can fully live the life that we are created to live. God also wants us to know God's own heart, a heart that desires union and restoration, not separation and retribution. God's heart is one that embraces all, that leans towards forgiveness, that remembers our sin no more. That's the kind of heart that would inspire King David, a man after God's own heart, to confess: "Create in me a clean heart, O God," when he was confronted with his sin.

When we understand God's heart in this way, it becomes a lens for us to see and interpret the rest of the Bible. Jesus our high priest is no longer understood as a defense attorney that pleads our case to convince the divine Judge not to punish us. No, Jesus our high priest cries out to God for healing and salvation because He himself has experienced our pain and suffering. Jesus our perfect high priest shared in our broken human nature so that we can share in his healed human nature.

God still cares for justice, but it is not a retributive justice that focuses on punishment. God's justice is first and foremost, *restorative* justice that focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders

through reconciliation with victims and the community at large.<sup>1</sup> I'm not saying that punishment has no place in seeking justice. I'm just saying that retributive punishment often *hardens* the heart, while rehabilitation and reconciliation offers the most promise to *heal* the heart.

Finally, the cross is no longer seen as the punishment God intended for sinners that Jesus substituted Himself on our behalf. Instead, the cross represents the evil powers of this world which oppress and kill those without power or those who speak truth to power. In the Gospel of John, Jesus sees his death on the cross as God's way to bring life from death, like a planted seed that dies in the ground but grows to bear much fruit. For the Romans, the cross was the ultimate instrument of power *over* an oppressed people to instill fear. By being crucified, Christ shows God's love and power *for* an oppressed people by experiencing their injustice and sharing in their suffering in order to unleash a love that casts out all fear. The cross is the way that Christ will drive out the evil ruler of this world and draw all people to himself.

I apologize that I've given more a lecture today than a sermon. So let me finish with a story...

There once was a couple, married for 15 years, who began having more than the usual disagreements. For instance, she was growing increasingly annoyed with his sloppiness, and he was bothered by the way she was late to everything. They wanted to make their marriage work and agreed on an idea the husband had. For one month they planned to drop a slip of paper into his and hers "Fault" boxes. The boxes would provide a place to let the other know about daily irritations. The woman was diligent in her efforts and approach: "leaving the jelly top off the jar," "wet towels on the shower floor," "dirty socks not in hamper," on and on until the end of the month. The man was equally diligent about writing notes for her box. At the end of the month, they exchanged boxes. The husband read the notes and reflected on what he had done wrong. Then the wife opened her box and began reading dozens of notes. The first one read, "I love you!" The second one read, "I love you!" In fact, *all* of them read, "I love you!"

On this fifth Sunday in Lent, let us hear the matter of God's heart that relentlessly, persistently, and graciously proclaim to us: "I love you!" "I love you!" "I love you!"

Hear the good news: Christ saves us ... not from God's wrath, but because of God's love.

May we know this law of love in our hearts and live this love in our lives. Amen.

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This sermon is heavily indebted to Makko Nagasawa's conversation with Nate Hanson and Tim Ritter on the podcast *Almost Heretical*, issue 15: "Beyond penal substitution with Mako Nagasawa." <http://www.almostheretical.com/beyond-penal-substitution-with-mako-nagasawa>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Adam Foss's TED Talk, "A prosecutor's vision for a better justice system." [https://www.ted.com/talks/adam\\_foss\\_a\\_prosecutor\\_s\\_vision\\_for\\_a\\_better\\_justice\\_system](https://www.ted.com/talks/adam_foss_a_prosecutor_s_vision_for_a_better_justice_system).