Bearing the Name

On Holiness, Mercy, and the Pendulum Between

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The Crooked Made Straight

Mark, in his Gospel, reaches back to Isaiah 40 to tell the story of John the Baptist. Isaiah promised that God was going to make all the crooked places straight (that the high places of exaltation would be brought down, and the low places brought up) so that the lame could have a level path on which to walk:

"Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Isaiah 40:4–5).

In our own lives, we feel the unevenness. There are seasons that ask us to remain faithful through ups and downs, through times when we have questions about why suffering keeps coming. Another song some of us know puts it this way: God never promised that the cross would not be heavy. He never promised that. But he did promise that he would be there. And that is what we need to remember. That is what the call to faithfulness comes down to.

Order Out of Chaos

As I was teaching last week, God takes the chaotic waters and somehow redeems that chaos. The waters that are leveraged and moved about by every wind of power and force in this world, the very waters that the woman of Revelation 17 and the beast of Revelation 13 ride upon,

those same waters are *redeemed*. By the end of the book, the waters become "the voice of many waters," the redeemed singing out their deliverance. So God wants to call us out of chaos. He doesn't promise the absence of trouble. There will still be the voice of the serpent in our paradise.

And while we are there, while the serpent is whispering, we are being called to doubt the goodness of God. That was the original whisper. *"He knows that in the day you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like Him."* The serpent's strategy was to suggest that God's prohibition was selfish, that God was protecting his own unique place in the universe by withholding from us. Whenever circumstances begin to make us doubt, that same voice whispers in our paradise. The thing that holds us in faithfulness through the hearing of that voice is the conviction that the Lord *is* good, and we just hold on. The reward is to those who hold on.

The Pendulum

The mistake the church has made over the past two thousand years, in different ways and in different seasons, is the swinging pendulum between two errors. The Scripture is full of *oughts*, commands that constrain us to a certain kind of life. But sometimes the church has so leveraged those commands that we are left waiting for some direct word of instruction in every situation, unable to move in a natural way by the Spirit when the needs of people are right in front of us. Then, when we have achieved what we believe is the right standard, we begin to apply it to others (harshly, woodenly) to people who haven't quite arrived on their journey yet. The good commands of God become an iron-clad, unmerciful application laid on weaker people. That is one error. The destructive use of holiness.

And then the pendulum swings the other way. We become so concerned about avoiding harshness that we lose the call altogether. We do not state the true vision of the holy God we

serve, or his commands to live in his holiness, and the people of this world never hear the righteous call God has for them, the call that would actually bring order to their chaos. We confirm people in the faith, but in a faith that leaves them completely in their sin. That is the other error. The destructive use of mercy.

So we are called (as the church of Jesus Christ, as the Israel of God) to a vocation that is delicate yet firm. Holiness in our calling, mercy in our administering of it. How do we do that?

Notice that Jesus had almost nothing good to say about the religious elite of his day. They were confirmed in their religion. (I have a confession: I have a particular set of sins I worry about, and so did they.) Yet every time Jesus got around the people the religious elite had written off (prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors taking more than their fair share) by the time he was done being with them, just being with him caused them to turn away from the things that bound them. Meanwhile, the religious people, who did not see their need for a physician, walked away most of the time unchanged.

What is it about being in the presence of the Lord that does that? What does it mean to dwell in him and to extend that mercy first as we begin to encounter people? I have seen the high-holiness side of the pendulum destroy lives. The call to holiness has at times been so high, so unattainable, that people don't believe they can ever reach what is being held over them. It leads to despair, despondency, and finally a rejection of faith altogether. And on the other end, a life so open, so unconcerned with how our ethics and our behaviors land, leaves the community looking at us and saying, "How are these the people of God? Their lives are filled with the same brokenness as everyone else's."

We are delivered out of slavery in order to live differently. Paul, when he speaks of the law, is *not* talking about "thou shalt not kill" or "thou shalt not steal." He is talking about the

laws of separation: the laws that said *eat these foods, wear that ribbon, observe these holy days, don't trim the corners of your beard*. What Paul was concerned about was *table fellowship*, what was keeping the Jewish church distant from Gentiles coming into the church. Those were the things Christ broke down in his flesh:

"For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances" (Ephesians 2:14–15).

Those laws are gone. But the moral commands remain, and the greatest sin that caused Israel to be scattered from her holy land was not the failure to keep the smaller boundary markers. It was something much closer to the center of the Decalogue. We will get to it in a moment.

Grace First, Then Law

It is so important to see this: God did not give the law and *then* deliver Israel. He delivered Israel and *then* gave the law. He called Moses out of the blue. He gave Moses a word for their deliverance. With a mighty hand he led them out. He opened the Red Sea, fed them in the wilderness, gave them drink in the wilderness, and finally gave them the law in the wilderness. Every one of those acts was unilateral. They could not save themselves; if they could have, they would have at some point during their four hundred and thirty years in slavery. It took an act of grace.

Look at Exodus 19. Moses goes up the mountain to meet God, and God says:

> You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My

> covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:4–6)

"You have seen what I *did*." Past tense. The grace is already accomplished. *Now therefore* (*now*, in response to what I have already done) be a kingdom of priests. The whole earth is mine, but you have a special calling to be a mediating priesthood to all the peoples who are lost. Live my life and my character in front of them, so that they come to know who I am, more deeply than the idols and the chaotic lords that have dominion over them.

"You Shall Not Take My Name in Vain"

Then in Exodus 20 come the Ten Words. The first three concern the relationship between Israel and God:

"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image . . . You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:3–7).

Three commands. Three layers. The first: have no other gods. We are to be exclusive, no pantheon, no hedging. The second: no carved images. The other nations would set up a territory, install a carved image of their god in it, do an incantation over it, and assert that the god owned that territory. But God does not want a carved image of himself, because *we* are to be the image. He created us in his image, male and female, to be his image-bearers in the earth. The reason God refuses a carved image is that he wants us to bear the *character* of his likeness, to demonstrate the God we serve.

And then the third, and I want you to feel this one. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." This is more than the prohibition on flippant use of the divine name (though it includes that, and we should be more careful with it than we tend to be, our ancestors in the faith were so reverent they would not even utter the name; even Revelation 4 substitutes

"the One who sits on the throne"). But the deeper sense is this: *bearing* the name of the Lord. To take or to bear the name is, like a garment, to clothe yourself in his name when you go out into the world. It is to walk out of your home dressed as a representative of God, an image-bearer, his ambassador in the world. *Don't bear my name in vain.* Don't represent me badly.

And I submit to you that those first three commands, and especially the third, are the commands Israel did not get right. They could check the boxes on Sabbath and on honoring father and mother. They could do the outward things that got them noticed. But the bearing of the name in the world; that is where they failed.

The Aaronic Blessing

Before we get to the failure, look at how God taught the priests to bless the people. This is one of the only commandment-zone passages we Christians love to quote, because it has more uplift than the rest:

> And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.' So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them." (Numbers 6:22–27)

Look at the components. *The Lord bless you*: provide for you. *And keep you*: protect you. *Make His face shine upon you*, his beautiful presence that makes all the difference. *Be gracious to you*, show you mercy in your weakness. *Lift up His countenance upon you*: the assurance of a father looking into the face of his child and saying, "I love you." *Give you peace*: wholeness. Provision, protection, presence, mercy, assurance, wholeness. That is what the blessing of God

is. And when we receive that and share it with others, all we are doing is sharing what God has already given us.

And then the line that ties it back to the third commandment: “So they shall put *My name* on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.” Putting the name of God on people; that is what the blessing does. Something begins to happen when you call people into blessing that doesn’t happen when you call them into a curse. And how quickly the words we speak, words we *think* are the righteous words of God through commandment, can turn into a curse if they are not seasoned with this same provision, protection, presence, mercy, assurance, and wholeness. Command given from afar, without the face and the countenance, without the seasoning of mercy, becomes something we are warned against.

How do we do that? Let’s be that kind of people. Let’s *put the name*.

The Place Where He Put His Name

In Deuteronomy 12, just as Israel is one day from entering the Promised Land, Moses restates the laws. Listen to what he says about the place of worship:

> And you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and burn their wooden images with fire; you shall cut down the carved images of their gods and destroy their names from that place . . . But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses, out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place; and there you shall go. (Deuteronomy 12:3, 5)

Destroy *their* names. Seek the place where God will put *His* name. Later, in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, that place becomes a city, Jerusalem, and a temple. That is where God placed his name. They built the temple, set up their kings, did their thing. But Israel’s heart began to fade. The temple was burned to the ground. The city was destroyed. Israel was distributed across the

empire of Babylon, “confusion,” uncreated, so to speak, and removed from the place where the name had been put.

“They Profaned My Holy Name”

Listen to the indictment in Ezekiel 36:

> “When they came to the nations, wherever they went, they profaned My holy name, when they said of them, ‘These are the people of the Lord, and yet they have gone out of His land.’ But I had concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations wherever they went.” Therefore say to the house of Israel, “Thus says the Lord God: ‘I do not do this for your sake, O house of Israel, but for My holy name’s sake, which you have profaned among the nations wherever you went. And I will sanctify My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord,’ says the Lord God, ‘when I am hallowed in you before their eyes.’” (Ezekiel 36:20–23)

There it is: the third commandment violated, named at the heart of the indictment. “You profaned my name among the nations.” When Israel was scattered, the watching peoples said, “How can these be the people of the Lord, when they’ve been removed from his land?” Israel’s failure to bear the name *faithfully* had made the nations doubt the God whose name they bore.

And then God’s response. *I will*. “I will sanctify My great name . . . when I am hallowed in you before their eyes.” When Jesus teaches us to pray, the very first petition he gives us is the same word: *Hallowed be Your name*. You cannot pray that God’s name would be hallowed and then go out and do something to profane it. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.* When we receive his will and his kingdom, we go out as citizens of that kingdom carrying his name.

Twelve I Wills

Now look at how God responds to a profaning people. Watch the verbs:

> For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. (Ezekiel 36:24–27)

Twelve unilateral actions of God in those four verses. I will take. I will gather. I will bring. I will sprinkle. I will cleanse. I will give a new heart. I will put a new spirit. I will take out the heart of stone. I will give a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit. I will cause you to walk. I will keep. Then (and only then, after the cascade) the verb finally becomes ours: *and you will keep my judgments and do them.* Out of this abundant mercy of God that he just keeps pouring on us (at times when we have been unfaithful, at times when we have caused his name to be profaned in our homes, our communities, our workplaces) out of all that mercy, the response: *and you will*.

This is exactly the dynamic Paul names in Titus:

> “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age” (Titus 2:11–12).

It is *the grace of God* that teaches us to deny ungodliness. Not the law applied externally. The grace, internalized, transforms the inner life until the keeping of the commandments becomes natural: almost the *response* of the new heart, rather than the *condition* on which it was given.

Mercy and Command

In Isaiah 2 we get a stunning picture of what happens when the nations begin to hear that God has put his name in a people:

> Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem . . . They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isaiah 2:3–4)

Something happens when God's grace is borne well. The teaching of the Lord goes out. The nations come. The war machines become harvest machines. *That* is why it is so important to forgive others and to forgive yourself for the broken, sinful things you have done or that others have done to you. Without that forgiveness, sin wins. Once forgiveness enters your lips for yourself and for others, the grace and victory of God can flow freely into the world.

Paul puts the indictment of the religious side of the pendulum directly to the Jewish reader in Romans 2:

> You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (Romans 2:21–24)

"The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." There is the third commandment again, surfacing in the New Testament's most direct critique of religious failure. The reason Paul has to spend Romans 1 talking about Gentiles whose minds are futile and whose

hearts are darkened is because there have not been Jews living the law out faithfully in front of them. The whole world is under sin, Paul concludes, and only by the unilateral mercy of God can anyone be lifted out.

But the answer is not to pull back from the command. The answer is *mercy coupled with command*. When Jesus stood between a woman caught in adultery and the religious men holding stones, he didn't dwell on either end of the pendulum. He said, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first" (John 8:7). The accusers shamefully retreated. He turned to her and asked, "Where are your accusers?" She said, "They are gone." He said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (John 8:10–11). Mercy first, then the command. Both. Together.

"I Will Write on Him My New Name"

Listen to what Jesus promises the church at Philadelphia in Revelation 3, a church he can hardly find anything bad to say about:

> He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name. (Revelation 3:12)

Three names will be written on the overcomer: the name of God the Father; the name of his city, the New Jerusalem; and Jesus' own new name. The bearing of the name comes full circle. The third commandment, "do not bear my name in vain," finds its consummation in a believer who bears it permanently, written by Christ himself.

And in Revelation 14, John sees:

"Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads" (Revelation 14:1).

Those who have fulfilled the vocation. Bearing the Father's name on their foreheads. And then comes the song:

> They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying: "Great and marvelous are Your works, Lord God Almighty! Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints! Who shall not fear You, O Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. For all nations shall come and worship before You, for Your judgments have been manifested." (Revelation 15:3–4)

This is the heart God has given us. A voice to declare what God has done in your life. A recognition that his grace is the only foundation we have, that he alone is holy, but somehow, in his blessing of you (provision, protection, presence, mercy, assurance, wholeness), you have received a blessing. And that blessing is the empowerment to bear his name into the world, to put that name through the heart that he has given you. The song of Moses and the song of the Lamb meet in you.

The City Where God Tabernacles

Where does it all land? Isaiah 66 already hinted at it:

> Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? . . . But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word. (Isaiah 66:1–2)

The house God seeks is not a building. It is a person. The contrite spirit. And then in Revelation 21:

> Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.” (Revelation 21:1–3)

“No more sea.” The chaotic waters of the ungodly have all been redeemed and settled. God himself tabernacles among us. *Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men.* And John 1 had already prepared us to recognize that name:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14)

“Dwelt among us,” the Greek word is *tabernacled*. The same word as Revelation 21:3. The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us. The place where God put his name is no longer a building, no longer a city, but a person, and now, in him and through him, a people.

No More Curse

> And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: they need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:3–5)

How many people on the high-holiness end of the pendulum have wept over their own sin while standing in pulpits and condemning others for the same sin, then gone home with their hidden hypocrisy? How many people on the loose-mercy end have stood in pulpits and left

people in the same chaotic, sinful condition they had walked in with, and felt the touches of the Spirit asking, *Are we really bringing people light? Are we really being the people of God here?* Or is there a place between, where the people of God put on a garment of mercy and a garment of presence, where we are *with* each other?

I draw back. I think, “They don’t want to hear from me.” Let me say it the other way. Let’s put on the garment of presence, of mercy, of provision, of assurance, of wholeness. Let’s take the name of God seriously enough to bear it well. If we show mercy and never offer guardrails for walking in the light of the Lord, we are committing people to more chaos. What we are called to do is commit people to a faithful life in God, a life of stability. There is something called truth. There is a way of living that leads to wholeness and soundness. *Shalom* is available by following the law of God, demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ, and manifested in his people called the New Jerusalem.

Let’s be that people. And let’s watch people who think they have nothing to offer the kingdom of God realize that, through God’s mercy, they have everything they need. They have a harp. They have a song. They have his presence. Let’s get the people on both ends of the spectrum walking in the joyful, glorious light of the beautiful city of God, bearing his name into a world that needs to hear it.