

Oct 25 (All Saints Day)

Overreaction?

2 Samuel 6:1-11

Before Scripture is Read:

There are certain texts that come up frequently in worship and there are certain texts that we never read in worship. But the obscure and unsavory Scriptures that we don't like to deal with are still Scripture. Those who are critical of Christianity can easily find scriptures that espouse hatred, violence and more. Those who are new to the faith see these same scriptures and wonder what to do with them. Mostly we want to ignore these perplexing scriptures. Yet here is the truth. Even though we may not like to deal with them, they are in our Bible and we have to answer for them. The purpose of this series is to facilitate conversation. We will examine scriptures in which God appears petty and capricious, scriptures in which God and/or God's people are responsible for mass killing, and scriptures in which Jesus says things that seem to contradict whom we know Jesus to be. This series will raise more questions than it answers; and the answers to some of these questions may never be clear! It is hoped that as we go through this series you will find the courage to address scriptures that you would rather ignore and we can see how God's love and grace is at work even in the most troubling texts. (read scripture)

The mighty group David had assembled to bring the Ark of God to Jerusalem started from Abinadab's house. Abinadab's sons rolled the cart down the hill. Everything was going well until the oxen pulling the cart stumbled. Uzzah, knowing that he would have a disaster on his hands should the ark tumble from the cart, "reached out to God's chest and grabbed it." God was angry that Uzzah had touched the ark and struck him dead. Uzzah was just trying to help out. He had good intentions, but he broke a rule and paid with his life. This scared David and the rest of the people so they decided not to bring it to Jerusalem. The ark remained in the house of Obed-edom in the city of Gath for three months before David tried again to bring it to Jerusalem. What do we do with a story like this?

This is one of many stories in the Bible where the punishment of God doesn't seem to fit with the act. We believe that the punishment should be proportional to the crime. This is not a new idea. It goes clear back to Leviticus and the eye for an eye precept commonly known as Lex Talionis, a Latin phrase meaning Law of Retaliation. Though this eye for eye thing seems harsh to our ears it was actually written with human rights in mind. If someone chops off your hand, the most you can do in retaliation is to chop off one of that person's hands. You are not allowed to respond to a maiming by killing your attacker's family and burning down his village. Even Leviticus warns us not to go overboard with punishments. The idea of proportional punishment is written into God's law. Yet when it comes to punishing poor Uzzah, God doesn't seem to adhere to the same standard. We might excuse this if it were the only occurrence, but there are other examples to be found in scriptures. We have Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt just for taking a peek over her shoulder at the place she had called home. Or there is Jonah being swallowed by a big fish just because he didn't want to do what God had asked. We then say, well that is the Old Testament. When we get to the time of Jesus things change. Then you have the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They were members of the Christian group in Jerusalem. They sold a piece of land. Many were doing this and giving all of the proceeds to the church. Ananias and Sapphira decided to keep some back but say that they were giving their all. When Ananias gives the gift to Barnabas he was challenged as to the amount. He assured them it was the entire amount he had received for the land he had sold. Barnabas calls him a liar and he drops dead. A little later Sapphira comes and confirms the amount. She is told that it is wrong to conspire against the Holy Spirit and she drops dead.

In all of these cases the punishment doesn't seem to fit the crime. Who among us hasn't, in trying to do good, ended up doing something not so positive? Just like Uzzah. Or who hasn't ignored a direction, like Lot's wife, or said no to a job, like Jonah, or not paid our full pledge like Ananias and Sapphira? Do we have to live in dread of God because of that? Is our God to be feared or do we believe the words of Jesus that God loves and forgives and encourages. These passages are in the Bible. We need to do something with them. They are used by doubters to cast dispersions on our faith.

They are confusing to most. We wish they weren't in the Bible. What do you do with such perplexing scriptures?

There are three ideas that I can take from these scriptures. The first is that the sin committed might be a bigger deal than we think. Perhaps the lesson we take from these perplexing Scriptures is not that God is ready to strike us down for seemingly minor infractions but that these infractions are not as minor as they seem. Scholars have argued that Uzzah was in charge of the Holy Ark. All of the influential people were there. What would it have said to them if there were no consequences for treating such Holy things with disdain? Would there have been a temple? So Uzzah paid with his life to teach all a lesson. You could use that same logic for the others. Lot needed to understand that God must be obeyed. The prophets needed to hear that they could not pick and choose their assignments. Annanias and Sapphira had to pay to remind the church that a pledge is a pledge. Now why this answer makes some sense it still makes me want to quake in my shoes. What if God decides I am the one to be used to teach others a lesson?

The second thing people have said is akin to the first in that God does not look at just the action but all the following reactions as well. We are to think of our deeds as being like the rock tossed into the still pond and the reactions being the ripples. Even a small rock can disturb the entire surface of the pond. In this understanding, the punishment does fit the crime because only God sees the total ramifications of our actions. Uzzah was punished not for keeping the Ark from falling off the wagon and being smashed, not a good thing, but for all those who would have begun to treat God's word with casualness. It would have seemed that there is no consequence to misbehaving. That ripple is huge. This at least gets us back to the law of retribution but it says nothing about grace and love.

The final idea is that ignoring God has greater consequences than we want to admit. Only thinking of God as a God of grace and mercy sometimes makes us think we don't have to try very hard to be faithful. God will always love us and forgive us when we mess up. Hearing these scriptures should make us uncomfortable. It should make us think critically about the relationship between justice and mercy. It should make us ask questions about the relationship between grace and consequences.

These stories can teach us important truths about God's hopes and expectations for us. God expects us to listen, to follow and to obey. There are consequences when we do not do these things. Back to our basic question: Is God to be trusted or feared? God is to be trusted. God loves us. God challenges us to be faithful. God loves us so much that God allows us to deal with the consequences of our choices so that we might learn and grow.

We don't have to worry that God will cause us to drop dead over a minor infraction. I believe a bit of hyperbole entered into the tales of these particular stories. But we should be concerned about how God views our actions.

These are perplexing scriptures to deal with. What I said probably raised as many questions as they answered. We would like them to not be in the Bible but they are there so we need to deal with them. We will continue to look at other perplexing questions next week.