

What If Jesus Was Serious...About Justice?

Week 5 ~ Chapters 26-30

Chapter 26 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then God Is Wrathful Because He Is Loving

The “wrath of God”...what images and feelings does that conjure up? It’s not a fun topic but, as Skye points out, it is a necessary one. Why? Because there’s truth to it...it’s a real thing. Now, I want to be quick to point out that, like many ideas about God, if our understanding about God (and in this case God’s wrath) is wrong or off, then a lot of damage can be caused. But we shouldn’t avoid, minimize, or deny a topic just because it can be misunderstood. Rather, let’s seek to rightly understand it.

Research seems to indicate that those who are historically powerful are the ones who tend to avoid, minimize, or deny the importance of God’s wrath. Why do you think that is?

How do we hold God’s love and God’s wrath together? By seeing that they are not different things but different aspects/dimensions/characteristics of the same thing...which is God’s love. Another helpful angle might be to think about parenting. Do you love your kids? Have your kids ever made you angry? (Or, have you ever gotten angry because of something that happened to your child?) I imagine that the anger you experienced was due to the fact that you LOVE your kid(s).

- *How comfortable are you with discussing God’s wrath?*
- *Why is God’s wrath important? Can God be just without anger/wrath? Explain.*
- *How have you experienced love and anger coexisting?*

Chapter 27 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then God’s Wrath Is Usually Passive, Not Active

Quick reminder from Skye (which also serves as a big WHY we are studying/discussing justice), “...justice is central to [God’s] mission to free His people and all of creation from evil by putting everything back into its proper order.” (page 132)

- Active wrath = God’s direct intervention/confrontation of evil acts or people committing those acts; or God exerting direct measures in a situation.
- Passive wrath = God allowing the natural consequences of evil, pride, rebellion to play out; or God withdrawing His hand of blessing and protection. For example, three times in Romans chapter one, we see the phrase “...God gave them over...” (1:24, 1:26, 1:28).

To Skye’s point in this chapter, we actually see far more of God’s passive wrath in Scripture...but God’s active wrath is pretty intense and more memorable, which is why it fills our imaginations when we think of God’s “wrath”.

We generally take for granted that most of the time God is patiently, mercifully, protecting us from our own evil. But consider this: God allowed hundreds of years, generation upon generation, of idolatry, injustice, and immorality to go on in ancient Israel before He finally allowed Israel to be conquered and His covenant people taken into exile. What we need to remember is that the covenant explicitly outlined what would happen if the people were disobedient and unfaithful. We could even ask the question, what took God so long before He acted?

II Peter 3:9 states, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”* This may also explain why the psalmists repeatedly encourage readers to *“Wait on the Lord.”* Truth be told, God is far more merciful than He is wrathful. But nevertheless, in order for God to be good and just, as Skye puts it, He eventually allows *“...the full destructive power of our own evil to overflow upon us...God’s wrath is revealed when He does not interfere or protect us from our own evil choices.”* (pages 133-134)

Something to keep in mind from Scripture is that God judges BOTH His covenant people (be that Israel or the Church) AND the other nations of the world. No one is off the hook. All humanity is accountable to God and will be judged by God. There can be no other way if God is good and just.

- *What do you think about the idea that, most of the time, God is protecting you/us from the full consequences of your sin?*
- *Skye brings up a provocative example when he shares Abraham Lincoln’s commentary on the Civil War as God’s (passive) judgment. What do you think about that? What light does that shed on this conversation? What questions does it raise?*
- *The chapter concludes, “The real problem isn’t that we are uncomfortable with God’s wrath; it’s that we’re too comfortable with our propensity for evil.” (page 135) What is your response to that?*

Chapter 28 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then God’s Mercy Will Make The Self-Righteous Angry

This chapter makes me think of a coworker I had back in the day who really had a tough time with God being forgiving. He thought there were just some people who should never be forgiven, who were undeserving of a second chance, who were beyond redeemable. And he was an angry young man who thought very highly of himself, as I recall.

What is “self-righteousness”? In short, it’s basically using yourself as the standard on which you compare others...typically with yourself being in the superior place in the comparison. It is generally synonymous with being judgmental. Recall Jesus’ words from the Sermon on the Mount, *“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”* (Matthew 7:1-2) Basically, Jesus is reminding us to leave the judging to God...i.e. it’s simply not our place.

I like how Skye pairs the older brother from the Parable of the Prodigal with the prophet Jonah from the Old Testament. (In case you're unaware, there's A LOT more going on in the story of Jonah than getting swallowed up by a big fish. Don't be distracted by that interesting detail.) The book of Jonah is all about the heart of God. **God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and relents from sending calamity.** (See Jonah 4:2, Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8-9, Joel 2:13) In fact, we could say that this point should be the biggest takeaway anyone reading the Old Testament should get. This is what our God is like!

Here's another quick reminder about the whole point of this book and this series, "...*God's justice is always restorative before it is ever punitive, because His primary desire is to restore His relationship with His children.*" (page 139)

This is probably the biggest difference between "justice" as conceived by the world and a Kingdom of God understanding of Justice. And while we may understand that conceptually or intellectually, we have to humbly acknowledge that, because we live in this world, we have likely been formed more than we like to think by the world's concept of justice (among other things). A good test for how formed into godliness/Christlikeness we are is who we're willing to extend mercy and compassion to.

- *How would you define "self-righteous"? Who do you believe you are superior to? (Be honest.)*
- *Skye asks a good question, "If God were to forgive the person you despise most, would you join the celebration?" (page 140) Or, who would you have a hard time seeing mercy extended to?*
- *Since God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, that means we should be like that too. How are you/we cultivating such character in ourselves?*

Chapter 29 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then Empathy Heals Arrogance And Judgmentalism

Empathy is the ability to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes/situation; it's the ability to understand, share, and connect with the thoughts and feelings of another person. You know who was a master at empathy? The Master Himself...Jesus. This is why it is shocking and scandalous that much of the anti-empathy rhetoric that's being spewed these days is from people who claim to follow Jesus. It is simply mind-blowing (in a negative way).

Skye diagnoses the issue well in this chapter...

Empathy has declined because of our hurriedness/business (which keeps us very distracted). Empathy has declined due to separation/distance between people (caused in part by the wealth gap, along with the "Big Sort", where people stay cloistered/siloed with like-minded people).

(I would add) Empathy has declined due to our increased isolation and indulgence that comes with greater use of technology—i.e. more screen time, less face-to-face interaction. (This reinforces both the distance and distraction that Skye mentions.)

All of this cultivates a greater/deeper Us vs. Them mentality, which encourages more judgement and less empathy. All of it is a recipe for ugliness and cruelty (and injustice) in our culture/society.

But the remedy is actually pretty easy once we realize the problem...and truly want to fix it. Additionally and importantly, the Church (when healthy) is uniquely qualified to address this. In fact, the very existence of the Church is a solution to this problem. The Church has always meant to be a diverse community of various backgrounds, socio-economic classes, etc. who find their common identity in Jesus. A (healthy) church regularly gets together (which addresses the distance/isolation issue) and learns, grows, worships, fellowships, and reflects together (which addresses the distraction issue by giving us focus and guiding our attention). The Church really ought to be the most empathic community in the world...as we reflect the One we follow.

- *How empathetic are you? How are you gauging that?*
- *To cultivate empathy we really need to know another person's story. Think about the people who make up your church family (or look around the room)...how well do you know people's stories? (Or, whose story do you know, and whose story do you not know?)*
- *Who are you in close physical and relational space with?*
- *How much mental space do you currently have?*
- *Who would you say you have a lot of empathy for, and who would you say you don't have a lot of empathy for? What accounts for the difference?*

Chapter 30 ~ If Jesus Was Serious...Then We Can't Reduce People To A Single Story Or Sin

How would you like to be known, or judged, based on your worst moment? Skye reminds us, “*Jesus always sees more than our mistakes. He sees a person created in the image of God who can be redeemed from their past. This is why He befriended cheats, sinners, adulterers, and thieves, and it is why He was able to look at the men murdering Him and pray, ‘Father forgive them’ (Luke 23:34).*” (page 146) That’s a great quality for the One who will ultimately judge us to have, yes?

Now, the question becomes, how can we cultivate that same quality in ourselves? The key, as Skye points out, is not to reduce others to a single point, quality, or characteristic where they are particularly different from us...AKA “Miniaturization”. Rather, we should look for commonalities...which are usually many, if we care to recognize them. Miniaturization cultivates fear and prevents the cultivation of empathy (page 147).

- *Who are you tempted to “miniaturize”...i.e. identify/reduce someone based on one data point?*
- *How might we practice viewing people multi-dimensionally...i.e. taking in multiple data points and looking for commonalities as opposed to differences?*
- *How do you see “miniaturization” played out systematically...in the legal system, the work place, education, entertainment, the church, etc.? How is justice affected by that?*

Soul Training Exercise~ Cultivate Empathy By Creating Mental Space & Through Proximity

Many of the Soul Training Exercises we do are designed to create mental (and perhaps emotional) space. A regular rhythm of slowing down, getting quiet, reflecting/meditating, all in a posture of prayer, helps create bandwidth/margin, which in turn allows us to examine ourselves (prayerfully), to get attuned to and aware of God’s presence and activity in and around us, AND, pertaining to this week, can help cultivate empathy...which is in short supply these days, but which the Church should be rich in.

So the first invitation this week is to start (or continue) a regular rhythm (daily and weekly) of meeting with God by slowing down, utilizing silence and solitude, in order to receive more of God’s love so as to be able to share more of God’s love.

The second invitation, which is also tied to cultivating empathy, is to draw near to people who are not like you. Sadly, it is easy to stereotype people who are different from us. A way we can fight that is by actually being around people who are different from us and looking for how we are far more alike than we are different.

Perhaps this could look like shopping or eating out at a different place, with a different crowd, than you usually do. Maybe it means sitting amongst a different group of people at a game. However you do it, take that experience with you into your space of meeting with God and reflect on it together.

Read & Reflect on... (these are the scriptural passages Skye has at the end of each chapter)

- Ezekiel 33:10-11
- Nahum 1:2-6
- Acts 5:1-11
- Romans 1:18-32
- Jonah 4:1-11
- Luke 15:11-32
- Hebrews 2:10-18
- Matthew 26:69-75
- John 21:15-19