



NORTHMINSTER Baptist Church

"CHRISTMAS AND GOD'S REPUTATION"

A Sermon

by

Dr. John R. Claypool

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Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-9; John 1:19-30

Many decades ago twin sons were born to a merchant out in the Midwest, and they grew up to be inseparable companions. They did everything together, which means no one was much surprised when neither ever married but went to work in their father's store and eventually took it over at his death and ran it in partnership. Early one morning a customer came in and bought a dollar's worth of merchandise, and the brother who waited on him laid the bill on top of the cash register and walked to the door with the customer. A few moments later he remembered what he had done, but when he went to the cash register, the dollar was gone. He asked his twin if he had put it in, but the brother replied that he had not seen any dollar. "That's funny," said the first twin, "I distinctly remember laying it right here, and no one else has been in here but you and me." Had the matter been dropped at that point, nothing would have come of it. But unfortunately, about an hour later the first brother asked again: "About that dollar — are you sure you didn't do something with it?" This time there was a barb of accusation in the question, and the other twin was quick to detect it and flared back in anger. For the first time in their lives, a serious

breach began to open up between them. Again and again, they tried to deal with the matter, but every time the realities of suspicion and outrage took deeper and deeper root. At last it got so bad that they were forced to dissolve their partnership. They ran a partition down through the middle of the store and became vicious competitors to each other. Neither would speak to the other, and each tried to get the people of the community to side with him against his twin. What had been a model of harmonious relationship became a running sore that infected the whole town, and this kind of polarization went on for twenty years.

Then one day an incredible thing took place. It started when a well-dressed stranger with an out-of-state license tag on his car drove up and entered one of the stores. He asked the merchant how long he had been in business in that location, and when he found out it was over twenty years, he reached in his pocket and said: "Then you are the one with whom I must settle an old debt." He then proceeded to relate how twenty years before he had been a drifter and turned up in that town on a particular morning. He said: "I had not eaten for two days and had no money. I remember walking down the alley back of the store and looking in the door and seeing a dollar bill on the cash register. I had never stolen anything before in my whole life, but that morning I was so hungry I yielded to temptation, and while the clerks were up front I slipped in and took it. That act has weighed on my conscience ever since, and I decided I would never have any peace until I came back and made amends." With that, the stranger tried to hand the merchant a large bill, but he could not for the old man before him was literally dissolving in tears. All he could say was: "Come next door with me. I want you to repeat that story to someone else." And he did. Only this time there were two old men weeping uncontrollably, not so much about what that stranger had done to them, but what they had done to each other in response to his action. To think — they had wasted twenty years in poisoned hostility and recrimination — and it all rooted back to a single assumption born of error and suspicion.

This story sets in bold relief the dynamics that are always at work in inter-personal relationships. You see, we never approach an encounter with another in utter neutrality. We invariably bring with us certain images or emotional predispositions, and these factors — sometimes more than the events themselves —

color our reactions. For example, it was a negative image of distrust that prompted that one twin to keep on questioning his brother. Somewhere out of his past he had picked up a hint of suspicion, and this is what caused him to put a negative construction on an event that actually had a different character to it. Thus, an awful breach of alienation opened up, not simply because of what had happened, but because of an image one brother had of the other which had distorted his vision.

This is a rather unsettling disclosure of how we humans operate and make our decisions, yet by and large I think it is realistic. A person is most naive if he or she believes that all their reactions are fully rational or exact responses to external evidence. Underneath our reasoning processes are certain emotional images that we bring with us into every situation, and we have not really gotten to the bottom of the truth process until we have come to terms with this image dimension, for the way we feel has much to do with how we think. And what is true in our relating to other people is even more true of our relationship to God. Here, most profoundly, the image factor is crucial. Down underneath the interpretation we give to what God is doing or not doing in the world is this matter of our prior image of Him. How do we feel about Him? Is He for us or against us? Is He a Father or a Foe? In the religious realm these are ultimate questions and the place we have to begin to get to the bottom of our religious situation. It is my hope this morning to show you that the event of Christmas, toward which we now move, is of ultimate significance at this very point.

The writers of the Bible were very much aware of this "image factor" and the decisive role it played in the truth process, and this can be seen most clearly in that ancient and yet insightful story in Genesis about the fall of humanity in the Garden of Eden. As you will recall from the Old Testament lesson of the morning, the account begins with God prohibiting Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of one particular tree. At first we see the man and the woman accepting this without protest. They looked on the One who had given them their lives as utterly trustworthy, so they assumed that this particular "no" was a part of a larger "yes" which was designed for their well-being. Their reaction was much like mine a few years ago when I was being entertained in a lovely old home in Georgia. As my host showed me to my room, he pointed out that the house was still heated by an antiquated

system of steam radiators and I would do well not to touch them, for they could cause a nasty burn. Because of my belief that this host had nothing but my comfort at heart, it never occurred to me to put anything but a positive construction on this prohibition. And so it was with the first man and woman when the Giver of all things commanded that they abstain from the fruit of that particular tree. Out of a positive sense of trust for God's intentions, they assumed that such a directive was in their best interest, and they accepted it.

At this juncture, however, a negative force enters the story in the form of the serpent. He proceeds to reopen the question of this prohibition and puts an entirely different construction on what God had done and why He did it. The serpent insinuated that there was badness and not goodness behind this injunction. "Don't you see what God is really doing?" the serpent asked. "He is insecure, jealous, afraid of you. He knows that if you eat of that tree, you will become just like He is, and then you can topple Him. He will no longer be able to order you around like slaves. He has a need to keep you underfoot — dependent and lowly — so He can go on exploiting you. If you knew what was good for you, you would rise up, throw off His authority, and seize your rights. Stop letting this Tyrant emasculate you!"

Quite obviously, the serpent was doing here precisely what one of those twins had done back in the store; namely, he was allowing a negative image which he brought with him into the situation to color his interpretation of what had occurred. I find this account to be very significant in at least two ways. First, it illustrates decisively the impact that the image factor can have on a given event. Here we see something happening, yet depending on what was felt ahead of time about the One who was doing it, two radically different constructions were placed on it, and this is an important insight in itself. However, of even greater significance is the religious implication of this passage, for what we have here is a diagnosis of our human situation religiously, and it goes back to a mistaken assumption about the character of God. By means of these primitive symbols, the writer of Genesis is trying to tell us that things began to go wrong historically the moment human beings embraced a false image of God. Just as the twin brother sided with his suspicions and allowed a mistaken assumption to become the basis of a disastrous course of action, so the first man and woman are pictured as

opting for the serpent's negative image rather than their prior stance of trust, and this is what got history off on the wrong foot. This is what the Bible calls "the sin of the world." This is the poison spring out of which all of the agonies of history have emerged. Somewhere back in the early beginnings of time, the human race jumped to the wrong conclusion about God. They got it in their minds that the Creator was their Enemy — a Conspirator at odds with their well-being, a Tyrant to be feared and resisted. And once this image took root, people began to act accordingly in relation to God's will and chaos resulted. Just as suspicion born of a mistaken image led one twin brother to wreck what had been a harmonious and productive partnership, so human beings proceeded to make havoc of this earth, because their minds became poisoned by a gross misunderstanding of the nature of God.

Looked at from one perspective, the history of our planet is simply the chronicle of the wrong actions that have proceeded from this wrong image. After all, if God is conceived as an Enemy, as One Who is opposed to our fulfillment and as One Who is trying to hold us down rather than trying to build us up — then there are three basic responses one can make. For example, a person can resign fatalistically before such a Tyrant and decide just to take it. Or he or she can rebel in defiance and attempt to battle it out with such an Enemy. Or there is the alternative of appeasement; that is, attempting somehow to bribe or placate the Deity in the hope of changing His attitude from hostility into charitableness. There are evidences in history of each one of these alternatives being lived out. A mood of fatalistic pessimism hovered over much of the ancient world like a cloud, and it is still the dominant spirit and stance of Eastern religions. Life in history is regarded as "a bad go" any way you look at it, and the sooner one can be delivered out of it the better. This is the religion of resignation. Other people have attempted to fight back and to challenge whatever gods there may be, even though they realize from the first it is a mismatch, and they finally go down with their heads bloody but unbowed. And of course, there is that vast expanse of ritual and sacrifice which aims rather pathetically at trying to appease the hostile heavens and hopes by its sweet-smelling offerings somehow to curry a little favor with the great Foe in the sky.

I repeat — the history of our planet is repleat with actions that all hark back to this one basic source;

namely, a negative image of God, the idea that He is a Tyrant who is trying to oppress us rather than a Father who is trying to humanize and complete us. This is "the sin of the world" that corrupted history and still corrupts. And I ask you: is this not our basic problem this morning? Deep down most of us viewing life with a negative image of God. At the feeling level He appears to us as an Antagonist — the One whom we dread and fear and want to evade. C. S. Lewis writes about the junior boy who once described God as "the Great Kill Joy," and went on to say: "Whenever He finds anyone having a good time, He puts a stop to it as quickly as He can." When I am honest to my earliest memories, this is the way I felt about God. His will and my joy were utterly antithetical. I was sure that if I committed myself wholly to His purposes — **surrender** was the word used in my childhood — this would result in the drabest kind of human existence on the back side of Africa. I was infected, as is each one of us, by that fatal suspicion born so long ago when human beings sided with the serpent and sent history off in the wrong direction.

It is against this background that the story of Christmas needs to be understood, for at its deepest level it is the beginning of the Event by which God sought to counter this problem and to do something for us at the image level. Just as that stranger appeared to the twins and challenged the assumptions that had led to all their actions, so the figure of Christ entered history to set right what had gone wrong. John the Baptist was right to the point when he said of Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) This is precisely what Jesus came to do. He was God's Messiah and it was the Messiah's business to get at the root of sin by doing something about our basic problem; namely, our mistaken image of God. Another way of putting it is to say that this One came to effect reconciliation between creatures and Creator. However, notice carefully that the form this reconciliation took was the exact opposite of the way it had always been understood. Because God was thought to be the Antagonist, all reconciliation before Christ had been aimed at Him and was an attempt to change the way He felt about us and to get Him not to be hostile anymore. However, Jesus' reconciliation was the exact reverse of this process; it moved in the other direction. It was human beings who needed changing, not God. Jesus came to demonstrate that the problem was in us, not in God. Just as that twin had jumped to the wrong conclusion

about his brother and proceeded to tear up their relationship, so human beings since Adam and Eve have jumped to the wrong conclusion about God. And it was all a mistake, an erroneous assumption like that of the twin, based on suspicion rather than fact. And this is what Jesus came to correct — to get at “the sin of the world” by going to its very root — our suspicion of our Source.

How did He do it? By offering love and healing to all he touched and then saying: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father.” He lived out during His days what God really is like in relation to human beings, and this was more akin to the image of primal trust Adam and Eve began with than the suspicion of the serpent. Would God “spare not His only Son but offer Him up for us all,” and come among us as One Who heals and forgives and wants us to have life and have it more abundantly if He really were a Tyrant Who is jealous and insecure and determined to hold us down? Of course not. Above all else, Jesus did one thing — **He showed us the Father** and said: “Behold your God!” By the very fact of His coming and how He conducted Himself while here, He did take away the sin of the world by correcting that image which got it all off on the wrong foot initially.

Thus John Killenger is right: “Jesus was God’s answer to a bad reputation.” He really did counter the error of the serpent with a true image of God-likeness. He did for the whole world what that well-dressed stranger did for those estranged brothers long ago. He retold an ancient story and set right what had gone wrong, and that opened the way for reconciliation and the healing of an old wound and the beginning of glad tidings of great joy.

Now I ask you — will you let the Stranger Who comes to us at Christmas do this for you in relation to God? Here is what the One Who inhabits the heaven is really like. To the mystery of Godness Jesus gives a face, and on that face there is a smile! You do not have to fear Him or resist Him or avoid Him any more. He is for you, your greatest Ally, the Source and Secret of your joy! And Jesus came at Christmas to get humanity and its Source back together again after all these centuries of suspicion and hostility. He came to take away the sin of the world — our mistaken image of God — and to show us the Father.

The question is: Will you let Him. . . will you. . . will you?