

Nature & Character of God, pt. 1

I want to say something this morning that both profoundly simple and profoundly important. We are Christians, which means we are followers of Jesus Christ. And, to be followers of Jesus Christ means that we believe He is the One through Whom we know God. He says it very plainly in John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me." And, in verse 9 of John 14, Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father."

There is nothing more important about us than what we believe in our heart of hearts about God. If we don't believe there is a God we will, at least theoretically, live our lives without regard to Him, doing what we please or what we can get away with no scruples. If we believe God exists, but is distant and uninterested in the affairs of men, we will live much the same; God will be irrelevant to our lives. If we believe that God is cruel and impulsive, we may live in fear of him, with a good measure of resentment thrown in. If we believe that God is all-powerful and mechanistic, we will live our lives as fatalists; in other words, whatever happens is God's will, and there is nothing we can do about it so why try? If we believe in the Hindu god of castes we will live our lives thinking that all suffering is deserved and that some people deserve to be oppressed while others deserve comfort, riches, and power. If we believe in the god of the radical Islamists, we will take the position that all non-radical Islamists must be killed, enslaved, or converted. If we believe in the gods of the animists, we will worship rocks, trees, animals, etc.

I could go on here, but what I want to call to your attention is that the myth of all religions taking us to the same God is just that. It is a myth; in fact, in most cases it is an outright lie, the opposite of reality. I Chronicles 16:26 and in Psalm 96:5 say, "For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens."

We as Christians believe in one God, Whose glory and true character is revealed in the face and life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Any so-called "deity" that doesn't match up with Him is no god at all but rather a worthless idol or worse yet, a demon pretender. Now, does this mean that we have the right to be arrogant and dismissive and cruel toward people of other religions? Absolutely not. Does this mean that we should demand their conversion at the point of a sword? Absolutely not. The way of our Lord Jesus Christ is the way of sacrificial love.

2

"They will know we are Christians by our love." It is our love, which is His love living in us, that proves that we belong to Him. It is His love living and acting in and through us that will bring about the conversion of others. Our God is love, I John 4:8 & 4:16. If it isn't love it isn't God.

I must also point out that not all so-called "Christians" believe in the same God. Some of us are confused about the nature of the God we serve. This is why Christians are divided into so many sub-groups, and that they often have a hard time getting along with each other. Paul tells us that Christ is not divided and that we Christians are the body of Christ. The fact that we **are** divided is a big hint that something is terribly wrong. I would suggest to you that there are also idols and demon pretenders worshipped by many people who call themselves Christians. And, if we don't want to be among them we need to make sure that our image of God measures up with the image of God portrayed in the face of Christ. Our Scripture text for the series of sermons I am introducing this morning is II Corinthians 4:6, which says, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

The question I want us to be asking for the next several weeks is this: What image of God emerges when we look upon the face of Jesus; that is, how does Jesus Christ present the nature and character of God? What I want to do is take us through a number of passages in the Gospels with this question in mind. My goal is to help us become more confident and unified in our understanding of the Lord.

We begin this project this morning in Matthew 4:1-11, this is the temptation of Jesus immediately following His baptism, and is recorded in Matthew 4, Luke 4, and is mentioned in Mark 1. I choose this passage because, in His conflict with the devil, Jesus defends the true nature and character of God. Matthew 4:1-4 say: "Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'" Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

It is very important for us to see the central issue in these first 4 verses. Jesus had been fasting for 40 days and nights, which

3

tells me two things. #1, Jesus was tuned in to His Heavenly Father and was well positioned to hear His voice. And #2, Jesus was legitimately and desperately hungry. After 40 days He was on the verge of starvation and this was His body's resurgent and urgent call for help. From what I've read about long term fasting, the first days and week are the hardest, after which the hunger pangs subside, and you can go a long time without the sensation of hunger. But, when the body is finally at the point of starvation the hunger pangs kick back in with a vengeance. Satan tries to take advantage of this physical phenomenon to lead Jesus into sin. Satan says, "If you are God's Son, order these stones to become bread."

And, here's where we encounter the central issue. Turning stones into bread is not the issue. Jesus could have done that and been right on target with biblical precedent. After all, God the Father gave manna to the Children of Israel in the wilderness and commanded Moses to bring water from a rock. Doing a miracle wasn't the issue because Jesus would go on to do many miracles in His lifetime. No the central issue is whose voice are you going to listen to and obey? Should Jesus obey the voice of Satan? Should Jesus be slave to wants of His physical urges? No. His answer makes it clear, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

The God we see in the face of Jesus Christ is the God who sustains us by His voice. He spoke the universe into existence. He spoke our world into existence. He spoke us into existence. And, Hebrews 1:3a says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, **sustaining all things by his powerful word.**" Again Jesus says, "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

So the question comes down to this: If we want to be sustained for eternal life, whose word are we going to listen to? Whose word will we allow to govern our lives. Shall we be governed by the word that proceeds from the lusts of our own flesh? That word will not sustain us. Shall we be governed by the voices of our peers? That word will not sustain us. Shall we be governed by the voices of those who want to sell us stuff we don't need for their profit? That word certainly won't sustain us. Shall we be governed by the voice of Satan? God forbid.

I find this more than coincidental: I have just finished a series

of sermons on hearing God's voice and the first thing we discover about the nature of God as revealed in the face of Jesus is that we have been created and are sustained by God's voice. **Our God is the God Who asks us and requires us to listen to His voice.**

Jesus' second temptation is recorded in Matthew 4:5-7: "Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'"

One thing we notice in this passage is that the devil is very adaptable. Jesus has answered his first temptation with Scripture, so Satan tries to use Scripture to his advantage in the second temptation. Jesus, however, is not fooled and answers Scripture with Scripture, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

In one respect this is a repeat of the first temptation; the question again is whose voice are you going to listen to? Will Jesus let the voice of Satan control His actions? The answer again is no way! God's voice is the only voice that matters. The new insight into the nature of God here is that God is not subject to human or demonic manipulation. We cannot force God's hand for our entertainment or to prove what must be received by faith. The meaning of the Scripture Satan quotes from Psalm 91 is that God will provide protection for those who live their lives in faith and obedience to the Lord. When various trials and enemies come against them God will keep them safe. They abide under His protection. Nothing can separate them from His love, Romans 8:39.

But, to take this precious promise of God and turn it into a cheap parlor trick to prove to oneself or someone else the existence or power of God is an insult to God. Some people who call themselves Christians play with rattle snakes or forego medical assistance or medicines to prove the strength of their faith or to force God to prove the power of His love. This is not what God intends. Our God Whom we discover in the face of Christ is the God Who asks us walk by faith in the authority of His word. **Our God is the God Who requires us to trust Him,**

to walk by faith not by sight.

In the third temptation, Satan seeks to bribe Jesus with the riches and power of the world. Matthew 4:8-11 say, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."' Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him."

The temptation here is rather straightforward. It pits the riches and pleasures and power of the world against allegiance and obedience to God. The first commandment, to put no other gods before God, is the object of Satan's attack. Get Jesus to worship him instead of God the Father and Satan will have succeeded in his insurrection.

What this tells us about the nature and character of our God is that He will abide no pretenders to His throne and that real life cannot be achieved even by everything the world has to offer. In fact, even if one should gain the whole world and everything in it, and yet lose his soul in the process of getting it, he will have gained nothing, Mark 8:36 & Luke 9:25. Whether we are rich or poor, famous or forgotten by the world, influential or powerless, our God is able to satisfy our every need. Our wealth or poverty is measured not in dollars and cents but in the depth of our relationship with Him. **Our God is the God Who will supply all our needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus,** (Philippians 4:19).

Today we discover four things about the nature and character of God: #1, Our God is the God Who asks us and requires us to listen to His voice. #2, Our God is the God who requires us to trust what He tells us and to walk by faith not by sight. #3, Our God is the God who requires our exclusive worship and will allow no other gods besides Him. And, #4, Our God is sufficient to meet our needs. In Him and in Him alone is found the fullness of life. Psalm 16:11 says, "Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

4thstcog@pennswoods.net

Sermon for June 28, 2009

The Nature of God, Pt. 1

Matthew 4:1-11

Jon R. Neely, Pastor