

Separating Sin and Sinner

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For God so loved the world... He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim, and the flaming sword which turned every direction, to guard the way to the tree of life. Gen 3:24 — And the average person says, "Wow. That's not loving!"

Putting the cherubim with the flaming sword in the Garden is the most loving act of all. It preserved the way back to the "tree of life" for us, through the cross – the other tree.

The first question that arises here, is for whom the way was preserved. And the second question is what God's "emotional attitude" was towards those for whom it was not preserved. God didn't kill Adam in a rage, as when Cain killed Abel. Adam essentially committed suicide. The curse was pronounced BEFORE the Fall, not afterward (Gen. 2:17). God wasn't responsively punishing Adam for his sin. The punishment, the curses, flowed naturally from Adam's sin. They were the tangible effects of his spiritual death which affects not only the person, but even the land itself which was cursed for his sake (Gen 3.17). All of this was declared by God, as if printed on a can of rat poison. "Warning: the effects of drinking this will be..."

Adam, nonetheless, was God's creature, and he was loved for the fact that He was the work of God's hands. Out of Adam would spring many seeds, some of which God loved as well, and some of which God hated. Some He cleansed and preserved; others He left in their depravity, sin, and corruption. He *left* them in that state; He didn't *put* them into it afterward (Joh 3.36; Rom 5.12).

In the same way, the destruction of the wicked, or more exactly, of the non-elect, isn't something that God did in reaction to their sin. It was something He established before the Fall. It's not as though His "hatred" of sin, or His "hatred" of the sinner, is an emotional response to what they did. It's an outworking of His laws of Life and Death, which are no different than His laws governing gravity and light. God is not lashing out at men in hatred. Rather, His Laws, His Governing Principles of the Universe, pursue their natural course and outcome. Grace is what stops that course of death from overcoming and destroying God's elect. He preserves us from the penalty and outcome of our sin, through the substitutionary atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

God's decision or judgment to do away with those at the flood, or others at the Last Day, is not done in hatred as *we* think of hatred. God's hatred is not like our hatred. It's not done in an uncontrolled rage as a man might do. It isn't lashing out and destroying his precious possession, like some petulant child frustrated with a toy that doesn't work right. He has designed Creation in such a way that there are predators and prey, emerging life and decomposition. It is an ebb and flow that is found in every aspect of Creation.

I don't leap for joy that the apple tree I planted in my yard is producing apples. I expect it to yield fruit in its season. That's why I planted it. And I don't weep when I prune off suckers, or trim infested and ingrown branches, and throw them out. I am training up the tree in the way it should go, guiding it according to a pattern I have in my mind.

Likewise, I don't lament pulling weeds from my garden bed. I designed the bed for flowers, and not for weeds; and so I distinguish between them. I preserve the flowers and I destroy the weeds. It's my garden bed which I designed for the flowers. I kill the aphids and exterminate the ants. There's nothing personal in it. I don't do it in a rage. I suppose I "hate" the weeds and bugs because they corrupt and interfere with my design and my plans for the flowers. But I don't

castigate them and stomp my feet and throw things at them. I simply see the danger they pose to the flowers, and I address that danger by removing them from the soil that I intended for the flowers, swearing by my own will that the flowers should have it, just as God swore by Himself when He made a promise to Abraham (Heb. 6:13).

I'm guessing that God doesn't leap for joy when a star goes supernova, and then weep when it turns into a black hole. He designed stars to do exactly that. So too when he created men: He created some for eternal life, and others for eternal death, to demonstrate His grace and mercy. It troubles us that some, for no discernable reason, are destroyed – as if all mankind has innate worth that precludes God from destroying any without justifying Himself to us. I suppose it is the distinction between sheep and goats, wheat and tares, legitimate and illegitimate, that is so disquieting to us. God chose to leave some for destruction and to keep others for salvation, without any condition, any qualifying attribute, beyond His seemingly whimsical grace. He “loves” some and “hates” others, just as I love some flowers and hate others.

We are simultaneously shamed and delighted to be called God's very own because of God's grace. We were elected by Him to salvation without merit. Yet, because the elect are God's precious possession, He has done everything necessary to preserve us through His Son Jesus Christ. The others, the non-elect, are God's creatures as well; but clearly, they are NOT His precious possession. So, God has elected some to be His, and to be preserved as Christ's seed; and He has left others in their fallen and cursed condition as Adam's seed, to fulfill the purposes for which He created them. Thus, it seems that he created some for destruction. But then, we are His to preserve or destroy. He may do with us what He wills during our lifetime on earth, and in eternity to follow.

That should be a sufficient explanation, until we look at God's decision to use the Israelites to cleanse the Promised land of the wicked. It seems to me (from the description given in Scripture) that it is very matter-of-fact and dispassionate. I have to remind myself that we are made of dust. The only value we have as human beings is the value that God places on us. We are not inherently valuable, and we have no rights owed to us by God. We are valuable because we are God's creatures. We become infinitely valuable when God calls us to Himself in Christ, and places His name on us. As for the others, the seven nations of Deut. 7:1, they were forfeit because they rejected the God of Israel; they rejected His covenant, and in their rebellion, they set up other gods of their own creation. They delighted in their “otherness,” and they paid for it.

The act of genocide commanded by God and carried out by Israel is appalling to my human mind – it seems brutish and somehow unworthy of the One True God. But that's only because I am not the Gardener. I don't know His design. I think the wild weeds are as beautiful and valuable as the cultivated flowers. I want an explanation – I want to know what God knows, and to see what God sees, and to have Him justify to me why some are planted and preserved, and others are torn out and destroyed.

That's where the Book of Job is helpful. It provides a divine perspective, a better understanding of who *I* am to God, and Who *God* is to me. It's in my contemplation of the greatness, holiness, majesty, and nature of God as Creator, that I am humbled enough to stop my questioning, and my challenging, and my urge to judge His judgments. The subjective attributes of “love” and “hate” that *we* assign to God, may bear no resemblance to His actual and objective attributes, which in Scripture are depicted by the words “love” and “hate.”

As for separating the sin from the sinner with regard to punishment, the punishment is designed specifically to separate the two — but only with regard to the DEBT of sin, and not the sin itself. Sin incurs a debt on the part of the sinner; and you can't punish an *offense*, only an *offender*. So, it isn't sin that's "punished" *per se*. Rather, the debt of sin must be paid either by the sinner or by his representative. The debt is thus separable from the debtor, and it may be assumed by another, who is the offender's "surety." Our surety is Christ. If this separation wasn't possible, then David would be condemned to hell, because his sin couldn't be separated from his person; nor imputed to Christ; nor atoned for so as to preserve him at Christ's expense.

In the end, therefore, it is indeed the *sin* which is condemned (i.e. it is judged payable). But this is only with regard to the DEBT it incurred, and not with regard to the sin itself. When a sinner holds onto his sin, its curse (its *effect* or *debt*) is exacted from him personally. Being unable to pay, he is swept away and destroyed BECAUSE of sin, not along with sin. The debt of sin must be paid *by* him, because he would not flee to Christ to have it paid *for* him. When we read that Christ was "made sin" for us, *it actually means a sin-sacrifice, or a payment for sin*. Our sin did not attach to Christ personally, as though he committed our sin (Heb 4.15). His blood atonement paid for the *debt* of our sin, which he assumed as his own debt. His death cleared sin's penalty. The debt being cleared, the curse of sin (which is death) did not fall upon us for non-payment. No matter how you look at it, sin is indeed divisible from the sinner.

What's troubling, I think, is the statement that God "loves" the sinner whom He condemns to hell. So, let me clarify that God "loves" the non-elect sinner only in the sense that the sinner is God's creature and this sinner has fulfilled all the purposes for which God created him — as I said when I began. He was created to sin; he was made for ignoble and common purposes (2Tim 2:21); he was created for destruction to demonstrate, *by contrast*, God's grace in saving the elect. The non-elect sinner was never intended to be saved. He was always intended to be destroyed. He wasn't a mistake or an aberration, nor did he somehow thwart God's will by sinning; he didn't fall below God's expectations for him. It is ONLY in that sense that God loves this sinner, or is satisfied or pleased by his "performance," because he is doing what he was designed to do; he is doing what comes naturally, and therefore he receives what he deserves by Law.

Because, in human terms, destroying things is associated with "hating" them, obviously we could say that God "hates" the sinner whom he sends to hell. It's as if the sinner was sent to hell (i.e. he was not saved by grace) BECAUSE God hated him, and not because of his sin. And shockingly, I think that's exactly right. Sin is irrelevant to his condition as non-elect. I think that's why Scripture says that, while they were still in their mother's womb, before they had yet done right or wrong, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom 9:11-13)

So, sinning is not the cause of God's hatred for Esau; nor did sin preclude God's love for Jacob. The sin and the sinner were separately considered by God! God did *not* look forward in time to see Esau sin, and therefore he hated him. Otherwise God would hate all men, for all men sin; and all men stand condemned because of their sin. But because Christ paid the penalty for the sin of *some*, he redeemed those sinners from the pit. And yet they were, and they eternally *remain*, the perpetrators of their sin. Christ is never considered the perpetrator of their sin. Rather, he is their sin-BEARER and sin-OFFERING (called an "expiation"). But the effect of their sin, the penalty for it, was transferred from the ELECT, imputed to Christ, and exacted from Christ in his blood-atonement on the cross.

Here's the key: the reason or the CAUSE of our salvation, is God's GRACE. And the reason or CAUSE of the destruction of the non-elect, is God's JUSTICE. The elect have found favor in God's sight and escape punishment, while non-elect have *not* found favor and must endure their deserved punishment. Just as righteousness is not the cause of our election and salvation, sin could not be the cause of another's non-election – even though it is definitely the cause of their destruction. It's seems clear that the sin and sinner remain separated *as far as election goes*.

Just because love is the stimulus for our election (“For God so loved the world...”), that doesn't mean it's equally clear that hate is the reason that some are left in their sins and trespasses. God did not put them in that estate out of hatred; but neither did He remove them from it – He hated Esau, *but not because of his sin*. God clearly hates sin (Prov. 8:13; Isa 1:14; 61:8; Zec. 8:17; Mal. 2:16; Rev 2:6). But I haven't found a single verse containing both “hate” and “sinner”, or “hate” and “evil-doer,” that would lead me to conclude that God hates sinners. God hates sin, and He commands his people to hate sin; but we are to love our enemies, who are sinners. “As he is, so are we in this world.” Therefore, if we are not to hate sinners, we might conclude he doesn't hate them either. However, their debt remains, and it must be paid. The penalty for sin is death. In the rasping voice of the Godfather, “Nothin' personal – just business...”

Now, let's consider this issue in the context of an evangelistic situation. Do we sit down with a non-believer and say, “God hates you! Come to Christ so that He will love you!” Would that be true? Does it fit with the Gospel? We say instead, “God loves you! He made provision in Christ to save and preserve you! Put away your sin by repenting, and trust in Jesus Christ alone as your Lord and Savior. Then your sin will be removed from you; Christ's righteousness will be given to you, so that you may stand on the Day of Judgment as God's dearly beloved child!”

In what situation will God's hatred ever come up in such a situation? Would we not be judging those outside the Church, by thinking that God hates them, though we never know who is or is not elect? Scripture is clear about God's hatred of sin, but not about His hatred of the sinner. The verses often quoted deal with the destruction of those sinners temporally, and in the cleansing of the land; but they do not deal with His hatred for the individuals. We don't know whether the persons before us are elect. But we assume they *are*, and that they can *hear* the Gospel call. Otherwise we're judging them, and we're assuming that God hates them. We must not do that.

So, while it may be true that God hates Esau and his kind, and that's why He will not save them, it is none of our concern. It is not part of the evangel — it's not part of the Gospel — and it's certainly not part of the Great Commission. So what business is it of ours? Our concern is therefore *sin*, to condemn it, and not to consider whether the person standing before us – or anyone else – is hated by God because they may be non-elect.

We say, “Flee from your sin! Repent and Believe! For the Kingdom of God is at hand.”