

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, May 15, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **DANIEL 6:15, 16**

“Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, ‘Remember, Oh king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed.’ So, the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions’ den.”

### **A KING’S DILEMMA**

Seven hundred. years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, Isaiah, in that awe-inspiring 53rd chapter of his book, prophesied concerning the death of Jesus, as though it had already occurred! Listen again to his words:

“But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.”

Now if those words mean anything, they teach that our Lord died as our Substitute: He took our place; He paid our debt; He set us free.

From Genesis to Revelation the Word of God teaches with crystal clarity that God’s law cannot be broken with impunity. God says through Ezekiel, another of His prophets, that “the soul that sins shall die.” (Ezekiel 18:4). As sinners, we incur the penalty of our law-breaking, which is death. We cannot simply be let off. The law must be upheld, its dignity defended, and its just penalties paid.

A splendid biblical illustration of this truth is this story of King Darius in Daniel chapter 6. You will recall from verse one that Darius had divided the kingdom of Babylonia into 120 provinces, each under a satrap or governor. Over these 120 satraps Darius set three administrators of whom Daniel was one. Indeed, such were Daniel’s exceptional qualities and distinguished service to the country that the king planned to promote him over all his colleagues. This, of course, aroused their jealousy, and they began immediately to plot his downfall. They watched him like hawks, hoping to find some inconsistency or inefficiency in his conduct of public affairs, so that they would have reason to lodge charges against him, and have him dismissed in disgrace. But they failed. because, as we read, “he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent” (verse 4).

So, they turned their scrutiny upon his private life, just as the news media are doing with our politicians today. Their only hope, they reckoned, was to find him guilty of disloyalty to the king on the ground of his religious convictions. Babylonia was a heathen nation, and these men knew that Daniel, as a pious Jew, gave his total allegiance to Jehovah, whom he believed to be the only true and living God. So, they cooked up a very clever plan of attack upon Daniel. They managed to persuade the king to “issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prayed to any god or man during the next 30 days, except to the king himself, would be thrown into the

lions' den" (verse 7). With incredible naivete the king fell into their trap. By putting the decree into writing, and placing his signature and seal upon it, he made it unalterable "in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians which cannot be repealed" (verses 8, 9).

The publication of the decree reached Daniel's ears, but he decided to pay no attention to it. He did what Peter and the other apostles did centuries later when they were forbidden by the Sanhedrin to preach in the name of Jesus. They replied quite unequivocally, "We must obey God rather than men!" (Acts 5:29). So, he refused to alter his devotional schedule of praying to the Lord three times a day. His practice was to do so kneeling in his upstairs room, whose windows opened westwards towards Jerusalem. Of course, he was visible to passersby, and there his enemies saw him. Immediately they went back to the king and reported Daniel's flagrant breach of the royal decree. We read in verse 14, "When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him." But he could find no solution to the legal problem he had created for himself. And to be sure, his administrators and territorial governors were quick to remind him that "according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed" (verse 15). They weren't about to let him off the hook. So, Darius reluctantly bowed to the inevitable and gave the order for Daniel to be thrown into the lions' den. The law had triumphed!

Now, of course, King Darius was in a dilemma because his decree was immoral. He had no business demanding that people worship him at all; and Daniel was acting morally in disobeying such an edict, and in continuing to worship the living and true God.

But God's holy laws are not immoral; they are the expression of His own moral perfection. Who would want to live in a universe created and governed by a God Who was anything less than morally perfect? And because He is "righteous in all His ways" (Psalm 145:17), He has a right to expect us, His creatures, to be like Him; and if we are not, there is a penalty to be paid:

"The soul that sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4).

Now herein lies God's dilemma: He is holy but He loves His creation. That same Psalm 145 that says "The Lord is righteous in all His ways," then says, "and He is loving toward all He has made." But how can God be righteous and just and holy and at the same time spare those who have broken His law?

Think again of King Darius. He respected Daniel and labored long to find some way of saving him; but the law must take its course and not be tampered with. So, God loves us sinners and longs to save us, but obviously He cannot do so by violating His law which has justly condemned us.

And that is why Jesus died on the Cross -- because there at Calvary God Himself, in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, paid the penalty of His own law, and thus vindicated the sanctity of that law.

And it was not immoral for God to do that. He was not asking someone else to be our

substitute, and pay our penalty, and suffer our punishment.

He did that Himself. Did you ever realize that only the infinite God Himself could atone for an infinite number of sins committed by an infinite number of people? But that is precisely what Our Lord accomplished when He died on Calvary! And that is what we remember and thank Him for when we meet Him at His Table, and hear Him say,

“This (bread) is My body given for you...  
This cup is My blood which is poured out  
for you” (Luke 22:19,20).

In the 27th chapter of Deuteronomy we read that every lawbreaker is “cursed.” Listen to verse 26, “Cursed is anyone who does not obey these laws.” Now that is strong language. But the Apostle Paul quotes these words from Deuteronomy with approval, and then goes on to affirm that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:10,13). Just think of that!

Remember, our Lord fulfilled the demands of the law by living a life of perfect obedience to the will of God. In the words of the writer to the Hebrews “He was holy and blameless, unstained by sin and undefiled by sinners” (Hebrews 7:26); and therefore, as the only sinless person who has ever lived on this earth, He could act as our Substitute. If He had been a sinner Himself, He would have to die for His own sins. But as the spotless “Lamb of God” (John 1:29) He made the all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world.

“There was no other good enough  
To pay the price of sin;  
He only could unlock the gate  
Of heaven and let us in.”

But not only did our Lord perfectly fulfil the demands of the law, He also endured the condemnation of the law by bearing the penalty and the punishment for all those, including you and me, who had broken the law.

“The soul that sins shall die.”

He committed no sin; but He died for us who have sinned. As Oswald J. Smith puts it in his famous gospel hymn:

“He died upon the cross for me,  
He bore the awful penalty;  
And now I’m saved eternally,  
I’m saved, saved., saved!”

He perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law, and because He loved us He endured the condemnation of the law; and let me remind you again that that law is the expression of God’s own moral being — “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:3).

Back in 1890 that incisive theologian, Nathaniel Dimock, captured this truth in these words: “There can be nothing... in the demands of the law, and the severity of the law, and the condemnation of the law, and the curse of the law, which is not a reflection (in part) of the perfections of God. Whatever is due to the law is due to the law because it is the law of God and is due therefore to God Himself.” And, that is why the atonement made by Christ upon the Cross is a necessity, because it arises from within God Himself. But the sheer glory of the Gospel lies in the fact that what God in His holiness demanded, He Himself, in His love, provided! As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 5:7, “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us; therefore, let us keep the feast!”

Emil Brunner, the renowned Swiss theologian, in his monumental work on the Atonement entitled The Mediator, says this: “The Cross of Christ is the event in which God makes known His holiness and His love simultaneously, in one event, in an absolute manner, The Cross is the only place where the loving, forgiving, merciful God is revealed in such a way that we perceive that His holiness and His love are equally infinite.”

And kneeling before that Cross, this morning, we can only say in adoration,

“He did it for me; He did it for me;  
A sinner as guilty as ever could be;  
Oh how I love Him, now that I see,  
He suffered., He died, He did it for me!”

The Cross of Jesus assures us of three things: that God loves us, no matter what we have done; that in His Beloved Son, He accepts us, as we come to Him in repentance and faith; and that He forgives us and washes away every guilty stain.

**LOVE : ACCEPTANCE : FORGIVENESS --**

**that is the message of the Cross.**

And in the light of what our Savior, our Substitute, has done for us, what ought our response to be, as individual believers, and as the Body of Christ within the world?

One of our Sunday School classes is presently studying a book by the Reverend. Jerry Cook, the pastor of a large congregation on the West Coast. Interestingly enough, he entitles his book, Love, Acceptance and Forgiveness, and I wish you would all read it. Let me read you a gripping story he tells in the first chapter:

A pastor in our town whom I knew only slightly became involved in adultery. As a result, his marriage went on the rocks and his ministry was destroyed. Since he was a strong Christian leader in our area, this brother’s fall came with a resounding crash. His church splintered into a dozen fragments and hurting, confused people were scattered all over the city.

A year and a half after all that happened, I received a phone call at 7:30 A.M. one Sunday. It was this former pastor. He said, "Would you mind if my wife and I came to church this morning?"

I said, "Why would you even call and ask that question? Of course, we wouldn't mind."

"Well," he said, "you know this is my second wife and I am divorced from my first. Are you aware of this?"

I said, "Yes, I'm aware of it."

"Well," he said, "I'll tell you, Jerry, we've been trying for eight months now to find a place to worship. The last time we tried was a month ago. That morning we were asked from the pulpit to leave. We've been met at the door of other churches by pastors who heard that my wife and I were coming. They asked us not to come in, said we would cause too much trouble. Still others have heard that we might show up and called in advance to ask us please not to come."

He said, "Frankly, I don't think we could handle it again if we were to come and be an embarrassment to you and be asked to leave. I just don't know what would happen; my wife is close to a nervous breakdown." By now he was weeping. "I know that you have video for overflow crowds," he said. "If you want you can put us in a room where no one will see us and let us watch the service."

I said, "Listen, you be there and I'll welcome you at the door." He came with his wife. They came late and sat in the back.

The compounding thing was that many of the people who had been hurt through his fall were now a part of our congregation. Nevertheless, we extended fellowship to that man and the Lord did a cleansing and a healing. We shed so many tears together. I never will forget how he grabbed me and buried his head on my shoulder; a man, 15 to 20 years my senior. He wept like a baby and held to me like a drowning man. He said, "Jerry, can you love me? I've spent my life loving people but I need someone to love me now."

In the weeks and months that followed, he met with our elders regularly and wept his way back to God through a most intense, sometimes utterly tearing repentance. If ever in my entire life I've seen godly sorrow for sin, I saw it in that man. He literally fell on the floor before our elders, grabbed their feet and implored them, "Brothers, can you ever forgive me?"

God healed that man and restored him to wholeness. Today, he's back in the ministry.

I say to you, that brother was restored only because God enabled us to love and accept and forgive him. Love, acceptance, forgiveness -- those three things are absolutely essential to any ministry that will consistently bring people to maturity and wholeness.

If the church is to be the force for God in the world that it should be, it must learn to love people, accept them and forgive them.

I would be quick to point out that that congregation did not condone what the erring pastor had done, any more than our Lord condoned the sin of the woman taken in adultery. But they kept saying to the man exactly what Jesus said to that woman, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (John 8:11).

Jerry Cook concludes by saying:

The church is in the world to minister salvation and wholeness to people.

Within the community of the gathered church, people need to be saved, healed, brought to wholeness in every area of their lives. But before there can be a coming to wholeness, certain guarantees must be made to people. Otherwise they will not risk themselves to be open with us enough to receive healing.

The minimal guarantee we must make to people is that they will be loved — always, under every circumstance, with no exception. The second guarantee is that they will be totally accepted, without reservation. The third thing we must guarantee people is that no matter how miserably they fail or how blatantly they sin, unreserved forgiveness is theirs for the asking with no bitter taste left in anybody’s mouth.

If people are not guaranteed these three things, they will never allow us the marvelous privilege of bringing wholeness to them through the fellowship of the church.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, a holy God has loved, accepted, and forgiven us. Dare we do less to others who, like us, have transgressed? I ask you to reflect upon this as we now approach the Table of the Lord.

**AMEN.**