GOD LOOKS LIKE JESUS

Jesus displays God's forgiving and just identity, *John 3:16-17*

God "proclaimed the name of the LORD"[1] when He revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, disclosing to Moses the character of the God covenanting with him and the Israelites (*Exodus 34:6-7*). Because it contains His explanation of His identity, Exodus 34:6-7 plays a crucial role in understanding God's character. John offers a pair of equally important passages for understanding God in his gospel. After recording Jesus' declaration of his divine identity (*John 8:58*), John wrote that Jesus informed his disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (*John 14:9*). Because God looks like Jesus, we gain insight into God's announcement of His identity in Exodus 34 by examining Jesus' life and teachings. This lesson concludes an exploration of God's character by considering how Jesus embodies God's forgiveness and justice.

"Forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin"[2]

God's self-revelation to Moses included His announcement that He "keep[s] steadfast love for thousands" (*Exodus 34:7*). While He protects/safeguards His steadfast love to endure its presence in peoples' lives, His steadfast love exists in a balance. Consider:

- God ensures that His steadfast love reaches "thousands" – **God's loyal love is a limitless reserve that He makes available to all people**.
- **Forgiveness offers a primary way God's limitless love expresses itself**. He forgives all manner of evil. Consider the three categories of sin mentioned in Exodus 34:7:
    - "Iniquity" (*'avon*) refers to crooked, bent, or twisted behavior. "Punishment" (*cf. Genesis 4:13*) is to visit someone's iniquity on them, causing them to experience the crooked results of their choices. God's punishment thus gives people the dignity of carrying their own consequences (*cf. Numbers 14:1-35*). Conversely, God's forgiveness refers to Him taking on the responsibility of dealing with people's *'avon*.
    - "Transgression" (*pesha*) describes disloyalty to a relationship and encompasses ideas of rebellion, betrayal, and breaking trust. In the Bible, peoples' idolatry, mistreatment of others, and violence represent their failure to honor their relationship with God.
    - "Sin" (*khata*) portrays a failure to fulfill a goal. God created humans to be His image-bearers; all humans are sacred figures representing His will and character. Sin centers on the failure to faithfully represent God, a failure that primarily revolves around the way people treat one another.
- God's declaration of His forgiveness reveals that He is not merely a God **who** forgives, but that He **is** a forgiving God (*Micah 7:18-20*). His identity shows His eagerness to forgive.

[1] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.
[2] Exodus 34:7.

- However, God does not disregard justice; **He will punish those who do not want His forgiveness** (*Exodus 34:7*). Consider the following aspects of His justice.
    - God's justice involves allowing people to experience the corrupt, death-inducing things they have chosen for themselves (*cf. Numbers 14:1-35; Romans 1:18-32*).
    - God's justice does not pursue retribution or vengeance but seeks healing and renewal (*Hebrews 12:5-11; cf. Deuteronomy 28:15-68, esp. vv.64-68*).
    - God's justice exists in a deliberate balance with His forgiveness – He extends forgiveness to thousands while punishing three or four (*Exodus 34:7*).
    - God thus predisposes Himself to overwhelmingly generous grace (*cf. James 2:13; 4:6; 5:11*).

"Forgive your brother from your heart"[3]

Jesus, commissioned by God to accomplish a mission to save rather than condemn (*John 3:16-17*), embodies God's forgiving and just identity. Consider Jesus' teaching about forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35, which applies God's character to interpersonal relationships.

- Following his discussion about the need to protect his "little ones," Jesus described what to do when someone does sin against one of his followers (*Matthew 18:15-20*).
- Jesus laid out a process that moved from private to public addresses, designed to fulfill God's will that not one of His people should perish (*Matthew 18:14-17*).
- Even though the process Jesus described seeks restoration, severe consequences exist for anyone who refuses to submit to God's will (*Matthew 18:17*).
- Additionally, Jesus entrusted to members of his church the responsibility of protecting the church community from sin's influence but instructed them to exercise it in ways consistent with God's identity and will (*Matthew 18:18-20*).
- Jesus' response to Peter's question about the limits of forgiveness illustrates what it looks like when one acts consistent with God's identity and will – they practice unlimited forgiveness in their relationships with others (*Matthew 18:21-35*).

Applications

Consider the following applications of God's forgiving and just identity.

- God's predisposition to mercy means we should practice unreasonable forgiveness in our relationships.
- While God calls each of us to practice immediate, generous forgiveness, our judgment practice involves a slower, multi-step process overseen by the community.
- Rushing to judgment reveals a misunderstanding, or mistrust, of God's identity.
- We must allow God's identity revealed through Jesus and the Bible to define our practice of forgiveness and judgment rather than the issues and agendas driving our culture.

May God help us faithfully balance forgiveness and justice in our relationships.

[3] Matthew 18:35.