



Week 5: His Ways Are Higher Than Our Ways

Based on “Gentle & Lowly” by Dane Ortlund

NCAC Adult Sunday School

February 13, 2022

“The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him, is to not believe that he loves you.” –John Owen (as rendered by R.J.K. Law)

COURSE GOAL: To reflect on not just what Jesus has done or is doing, but on who he *is*—and to then find encouragement, strength and rest as we delight in the deepest affections of Christ for his people.

Want to Read Along? *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* by Dane Ortlund

- February 13: Chapters 17-18
- February 20: Chapters 19-21
- February 27: Chapters 22-23

The only place in Scripture where Christ describes his heart: ²⁸ *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* ²⁹ *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29)*

We’ve seen this truth reflected in multiple aspects of Christ’s work and character:

- **Christ is now our sympathetic high priest.** (*Hebrews 4:15*)
- **Christ will never cast out his own.** (*John 6:37-39*)
- **Christ is now interceding for us.** (*Hebrews 7:25*)
- **Christ is our Advocate.** (*1 John 2:1*)
- **Christ is also our Friend.** (*Matthew 11:19*)

We’ve also seen that what the Scriptures teaches regarding the Holy Spirit, the Father, and God as revealed in the Old Testament is all consistent with what we’re told regarding the heart of Christ:

- **Regarding God the Holy Spirit:** *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:13-14)*
- **Regarding God the Father:** *Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? **Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.**” (John 14:9)*
- **Regarding God as revealed in the Old Testament:** *“The Lord passed before [Moses] and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, **a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...**’” (Exodus 34:6)*

We've also seen that for many of us, our view of God needs correction:

“The Christian life, from one angle, is the long journey of letting our natural assumption about who God is, over many decades, fall away, being slowly replaced with God’s own insistence on who he is. This is hard work. It takes a lot of sermons and a lot of suffering to believe that God’s deepest heart is ‘merciful and gracious, slow to anger.’

“The fall in Genesis 3 not only sent us into condemnation and exile. **The fall also entrenched in our minds dark thoughts of God, thoughts that are only dug out over multiple exposures to the gospel over many years.** Perhaps Satan’s greatest victory in your life today is not the sin in which you regularly indulge but the dark thoughts of God’s heart that cause you to go there in the first place and keep you cool toward him in the wake of it.” (*Gentle and Lowly*, pp. 151-52)

What is usually meant when we use the phrase “God’s ways are not our ways”?

⁶ *“Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;*

⁷ *let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;
let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

⁸ *For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.*

⁹ *For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:6-9)*

In verses 6-7, what are we told (or invited) to do?

What are we told we should expect to find when we do this?

In this context, what is the meaning of Scripture when it says that God’s ways are not our ways?

WATCH VIDEO: SESSION 8a

“The message of this book is that we tend to project our natural expectations about who God is onto him instead of fighting to let the Bible surprise us into what God himself says. Perhaps nowhere in the

Bible is that point made more clearly than in Isaiah 55. ‘There is nothing that troubles our consciences more,’ said John Calvin on this passage, ‘than when we think that God is like ourselves.’” (G&L, p. 155)

What are some ways our souls might become troubled as a result of thinking God is like us?

In the video, Ortlund stressed that God is not only unlike us in his *greatness*, but also in his *goodness*. What are some ways God’s goodness far outweighs our own?

The only other place in the Bible that we see the phrase “as high as the heavens are above the earth” is in Psalm 103:

⁸ *The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹ *He will not always chide,
nor will he keep his anger forever.*

¹⁰ *He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.*

¹¹ ***For as high as the heavens are above the earth,***
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him. (Psalm 103:8-11)

Together Psalm 103:11 and Isaiah 55:9 show us that God’s ways and thoughts are not like our ways and thoughts *in that* God’s thoughts of love and God’s ways of compassion are not like our own. God’s love, mercy and compassion are of a nature and magnitude far outside of our fallen way of thinking.

If even the most intense human love and mercy is but a faint echo of God’s love and mercy, how should that affect us as we go through life?

*For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
“I dwell in the high and holy place,
and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly,
and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15)*

How do these verses present another example of how God’s ways are not like our ways?

Another book that reveals this loving, compassionate heart of God for his people is Jeremiah. Through much of the first half of Jeremiah, God recounts the sinfulness of Israel. For example:

- *“I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil.” (Jeremiah 1:16)*
- *“My people have forsaken me.” (2:13)*
- *“You have polluted the land with your vile whoredom.” (3:2)*
- *“O Jerusalem, how long shall your wicked thoughts lodge within you?” (4:14)*
- *“This people has a stubborn and rebellious heart.” (5:23)*
- *“As a well keeps its water fresh, so she keeps fresh her evil.” (6:7)*

But, in the center of the book of Jeremiah, God once again reveals the true disposition of his heart:

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child?

For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still.

Therefore my heart yearns for him;

I will surely have mercy on him, declares the Lord. (Jeremiah 31:20)

Given all that Israel had done, what makes Jeremiah 31:20 so surprising?

WATCH VIDEO: SESSION 8b

What should it do for us to know that God yearns for us—that we are his “darling child” (Jer. 31:20)?

“The world is starving for a yearning love, a love that remembers instead of forsakes. A love that isn’t tied to our loveliness. A love that gets down underneath our messiness. A love that is bigger than the enveloping darkness we might be walking through even today. A love of which even the very best human romance is the faintest of whispers.

“And yet this may seem so abstract, as Jeremiah speaks of God’s heart—subjective, mushy, ethereal. But...what if the abstract became concrete? If Jeremiah 31:20—‘my heart yearns for him’—if those words were to get dressed in flesh, what might those words look like? *We need not wonder.* It looks like a Middle Eastern carpenter restoring men’s and women’s dignity and humanity and health and conscience through healings and exorcisms and teaching and hugging and forgiving.” (pp. 168-169)

How can we help each other and the world around us better understand and appreciate God’s love?

Ortlund encourages us to “not only repent of the sins in your life as you come to God, but also repent of your small thoughts of God’s love. Let his enormous, yearning love embrace you.” Let’s do this now.