

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
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*Holding God Accountable<sup>1</sup>*  
 *Psalm 22.1-15; Hebrews 4.12-16*  
Russ Dean, October 11, 2009



Accountability. The very word incites anxiety in our hearts. Held accountable: By the parents. (Did you do your chores?) By the teacher. (Turn in your homework, please.) By the boss. (You didn't make the quota.) By the spouse. (You didn't make the bed!<sup>2</sup>) By the Church. (We need someone to spend the night with Family Promise. Is your capital campaign gift up to date?) Held accountable... by God. Some of my gravest anxiety as a youth came from this idea, supported in no little part by this text from Hebrews, that one day I would have to stand before God – me, and me alone, before the judge of the universe and give an account. Every word. Every deed. Every moment. Like reading back some tormented video of my whole life – and I was a pretty good kid. I knew I was a pretty good kid – but the idea of being accountable in such a way was still fearful, for the word of God... is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart... I knew my thoughts, and I knew my intentions. I didn't revel in knowing God knew them, too!

My friend, John Paul Martin, taught me in Birmingham that “You get what you inspect, not what you expect.” This idea that all of this life, and all of the next, would ultimately come down to a face-to-face inspection by the Almighty instilled fear into my naïve heart. I think it is an unfounded and unfortunate fear. My sons don't have it. I hope your children do not either.

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<sup>1</sup> The poem, Sing Out, by Aaron Zeitlin, was featured on the cover of today's bulletin: “Praise me, says God; / I will know that you love me. / Curse me, says God; / I will know that you love me. / Sing out my graces, says God. / Raise your fist against me and revile. / Sing out my praises or revile. / Reviling is also a kind of praise, says God. / But if you sit fenced off / in your apathy, says God. / If you sit entrenched in: / “I don't give a hang.” / If you look at the stars and yawn, / If you see suffering and don't cry out, / If you don't praise and don't revile, / Then I created you in vain, says God.”

<sup>2</sup> In my 2006 Easter sermon, “Make Up Your Bed (Christ is Risen),” I ribbed my wife, who does not make up our bed if she is the last one out of it. I made several off-hand comments at this point in the sermon, referring to that “inside joke,” and informing the congregation that Amy's practice has dramatically improved since being called out from the pulpit! (<http://www.parkroadbaptist.org/sermons/20060416.pdf>)

It's not that I believe there is no accountability to God. I certainly do. It is that I believe what Albert Camus said in *The Fall*, "Do not wait for the last judgment. It takes place every day." "Judgment day" isn't like that day you sat at the DMV, waiting anxiously in line for hours to take your driver's test, worried you'd get the stern-faced instructor, and, like everyone else who faced this judge, you'd fail the test the first time.

Judgment day is a day like... today.

When you disrespect your mother – you're being judged. When you snap at your children – you're being judged. In the silence of confession – you're being judged. When the offering plate passes – you're being judged. When you pass, or fail to pass, health care reform for the helpless – you're being judged. When you receive the Nobel Peace prize for whatever reason – you – and all the world around you – are being judged.<sup>3</sup> You see, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction" is not just Newton's Law of Motion, it's the way the world works. Because we are interdependent, especially in today's world, radically individual, by all appearances totally free, but just as dependent upon one another as human beings have ever been – every action is judged by the next. Judgment day, our day of accountability, arrived long ago.

The Church has always viewed judgment, holding someone accountable, as in the purview of God's work. God judges; we get judged. God... holds accountable. But our bold scriptures suggest that turnabout is fair play. The words of today's Psalm, though among the strongest in our Bible, are hardly unique. Walk through the scripture, especially the Hebrew Bible, and you will find an assortment of

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<sup>3</sup> The congressional battle over health care reform continues to drag on, and last week's announcement that President Barack Obama had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, continues to draw fire from pundits across the spectrum. My point is simply that every action has a consequence, whether on a personal scale or an international one. The Nobel notification has understandably drawn strong opinions, but the take-home seems to me that whatever (perhaps little) the President had done by the February 1<sup>st</sup> nomination deadline caught the attention of the Nobel committee – perhaps this was Obama's action, perhaps it was simply the change of action/language/rhetoric, as some have suggested, from that heard from the Bush administration for the last eight years.

resentful, confused, angry prophets raising a fist toward the heavens and shouting their demanding questions, “Where are you?” “How long, O Lord!?” “Why?”

No one is ever rebuked for such an outburst. For any relationship that can be called a relationship needs such candor. And any partner worthy of a lasting relationship will understand, and tolerate, and even invite such honest critique. Even if it hurts.

The Church has too long shirked its responsibility in this relationship with God. Treating it as a one-way street of communication, the Church has gladly invoked God’s supposed judgment against various people, even imposed God’s purported punishment on them (sometimes with a sadistic smile). But too seldom has the Church taken its own scriptures at heart and raised its voice to the heavens in a warranted call for justice. Maybe we don’t believe the relationship is anything like an equality of relationship; maybe we don’t feel we have this right – but Psalmists and the Prophets thought they did! And the Genesis narrative reminds us that in the beginning we walked with God in the cool of the day, and spoke freely to one another (Genesis 3). Fear and lack of communication are at the heart of nearly every relationship problem – whether a marriage or an international relationships – and fear and lack of communication have allowed the God of the Church to remain for too long a God of superstition and of an outdated world-view.

When our best theologians and scholars and scientists have dared to hold such a God accountable, God has, maybe without exception, changed through the encounter. When Copernicus dared to hold God accountable for a universe that actually swirled around the sun – the God who created a world revolving around us died. When science dared to hold God accountable for the bacteria which turned out to be the cause of disease – the God who had cast plagues of illness on the enemies of Israel died. When Charles Darwin dared to hold God accountable for a literal six-day creation – the God who controlled and controls every movement on this planet died. When Martin Luther King, Jr. dared to

hold God accountable for the institutional oppression of generations of children, children who happened to be born in the wrong place and the wrong time and with skin just a little too dark – the God who would ordain such individual and systemic evil died.

Now you may argue that it was not God, just our wrongly-conceived or immaturely-held ideas of God, which died. But you would have been hard pressed to make the case before any preacher in the American South before the civil war, that the scriptural support of slavery was just our understanding of God. The practical truth is this: the Church's understanding of God, is God.

So, all the more reason we should to raise our fists. Raise our voices. Raise our complaints before God, for, as one professor of theology used to put it, “Any god who can be killed ought to be killed.”<sup>4</sup> We should not hold back our questions of God. Questions raised by theologians. Denials raised by scientists. Doubts raised by psychologists. Fears raised by terrorists. Anxieties raised by a changing world. Any god who cannot stand and be accountable, is no god after all.

The Psalmist had no doubt, however. At the end of the day... At the end of the rant... Even standing before the mouth of a deafening silence... God was God. As with the Psalmist, the struggles of your life may lead you to the edge of the abyss, staring into a deep silence, but it is the affirmation of countless thousands of the faithful, including even Jesus, that in that darkness we find the face of God. It may be Jesus' God of forsakenness. It may be Belden Lane's God “without adjectives, [God] without comforting signs of presence.”<sup>5</sup> This silence has led many, who were unwilling to face it long enough, unable to engage its contours, to turn and claim “there is no God,” but those who have waited long enough in the desert of that nothingness, and listened... have returned... changed.

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<sup>4</sup> John Shelby Spong refers to this quotation from a former professor, Clifford L. Stanley, in his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, p.xix.

<sup>5</sup> I do not know Belden Lane, nor where I gleaned this quotation, but it is worthy of note: “What the desert teaches is a radical letting-go / of the thinking-experiencing-managing self, / so as to be content with God alone, / a God without adjectives, without comforting signs of presence, / so that at last one learns truly to delight in nothing. / This nothing may be ultimately disclosed / by the Christian... as “Something,” / as the Holy Trinity hidden in light inaccessible / from every effort to grasp its mystery. / But the naming of the mystery is no longer an anxious concern / of those who've been to the desert. / Naming implies a control that the wilderness no longer allows.”

Holding God accountable is necessary. It is necessary in order to purge God of our biased interpretations. It is necessary so a newer, truer God can emerge from the chaos. Karen Armstrong calls this the “God beyond God.”<sup>6</sup> Holding God accountable is necessary so God can speak for God’s own actions, as if a defendant on trial. So we, as a jury of God’s peers, God’s friends, can listen.

But holding God accountable is also dangerous. Because it ultimately exposes us.

Have you ever been on the verge of laying an angry accusation on someone’s doorstep, when the thought of it gave you a moment of clarity, a pause which called for another accountability all together? “If I accuse her of being lazy... what if she remembers every Monday night when I’m laid up on the sofa watching football while she’s washing the clothes and preparing the children’s lunch and checking their homework!?”... “If I accuse him of being the cheat and liar he is... what if he remembers the affair I had last year with my secretary?” “If I say... what about...?”

Our friend, Roger Lovette, who has spent many years preaching, trying to find ways to expose his people to the Word of God, has had a recurring dream over those decades. It’s every preacher’s worst nightmare. He finds himself on the rostrum ready to deliver another life-changing sermon, but as he stands to walk to the pulpit, every eye on him, he realizes that he is... naked! A burst of panic runs through his veins, he is flush with embarrassment and a fully-exposed anxiety. Standing there, mortified at his nakedness, he realizes that if he can just get to the pulpit, he will have cover. So he scurries. I picture this comic scene with the preacher shuffling, his now-crumpled manuscript shaking like a fig leaf! When he finally makes his way across that ever-expanding rostrum to the pulpit, he breathes a sigh of relief. And then he looks down and realizes that a glass window has been cut into the front of the pulpit!

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God*.

The dream is funny because it's Freudian. But it's biblical too! In the presence of the *living Word of God*, all are *naked... laid bare... called to render an account.*

The Church needs to hold God accountable for the injustices in God's world. It would show God, and our world, that we care that there is injustice. And it would prove that we do actually talk to God. But when we demand justice for the starving children, we better be ready to hear, "*When you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me*" (Matthew 25). When we demand an end to our never-ending warfare, we need to be prepared: "Haven't I already given you a *more excellent way*? (1 Corinthians 13) *Turn the other cheek... Love your enemies...*" (Matthew 5) When we decry the corruption of a wayward nation and its shameful leaders, we may need to brace ourselves for those haunting words, "*Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone*" (John 8).

Yes. We need to hold God accountable. The prophets have shown us the way. Jesus' life of love and protest, which led only to his crucifixion before a God gone AWOL, and his world-altering resurrection after three days of deathly silence, should make clear there is no other way. Standing before God with my fist in the air may be the only way to get a real picture of who I am.

With the prophets and Psalmist going before us, with Jesus standing with us, Let us *approach God's throne with boldness*. For there we will find *mercy*. Only there will we find the *grace* our world so desperately *needs*.

May it be so!

## *A Reading of Psalm 22*

I shared these words before the reading of the Psalm, and invited our staff to help me in a reading by a “chorus” of voices.

Psalm 22 is best known to Christians because the opening words are quoted by Jesus on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But the Psalm is more than a cry of dereliction, a protest of abandonment. As I studied these words this week I began to hear a chorus of voices. One after another, in a stream of consciousness, the Psalmist’s voice and mood change erratically. There is a cry of anger and then rejoicing, a shout of fear and, in the very next breath, deep gratitude – the Psalm sounds like a confusing, contradicting hodge-podge of emotions. Until we let it be personal. And then we hear our own words, feel our own emotions, which are so often bound up in a cacophony of dissonant voices. Curses and praise... anger and joy... resentment and resignation... fear and faith... all from the same tongue. The Psalmist is each of us – if we dare to be so honest. So this morning, as our staff reads the Psalm, I invite you to consider your own relationship with God – the chorus of voices which you hear within your own soul, even if you have not the courage to speak these voices to God. As you listen, we invite you to hear the Psalmist’s...

RUSS: voice of anger.

AMY: Then you will hear her speak in joy.

MICHAEL: Listen as he cries, helplessly in self-pity.

GAIL: And as she voices her deep gratitude to God.

AMY: You will hear her fear and anxiety.

RUSS: And you may even recognize in his voice a word of despair. As we read now the Psalmist’s very honest confession,

ALL: Let us Listen!

AMY: For we may even hear the voices of our own hearts.

MICHAEL: Let us listen now for the word of the Lord:

RUSS (ANGER): My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.

AMY (JOY): Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

MICHAEL (SELF-PITY): But I am a worm, and not human; scorned by others, and despised by the people. All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ‘Commit your cause to the LORD; let him deliver—let him rescue the one in whom he delights!’

GAIL (GRATITUDE): Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God.

AMY (FEAR): Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

RUSS (DESPAIR): I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted within my breast; my mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to my jaws; you lay me in the dust of death.

ALL: You have heard the ancient story.

CONGREGATION: Let us listen now for the Word of the Lord.

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Ellen Davis: “balanced extravagances of the lament and the vow or call to praise ... explodes the limits of Israel’s traditional understandings” of God, of the world, of human life, vocation, and of death. NIB, 762.

Alternating voices “serves only to make the psalmist’s current distress seem all the more bitter.”

My God “rare and seems to represent an especially intimate form of address based on close personal attachment.”

Forsaken = leave (why have you left me... Implies a formerly close relationship)

Experience is dehumanizing “I am a worm”  
NIB 762-3.

Communal nature... Psalmist calls congregation to sing God’s praise...