

Weekly Encouragement

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When God Accommodates

By Peter Eng

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I had a view of God that focused on “What does God expect of me?” And to that query, I decided that God wanted me to be such-and-such. Yet the human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked ([Jer 17:9](#)) while I developed a view of what God expected of me. But that view was more me than God. It was more a tweaking of what I wanted without falling afoul of God than a true seeking after God. There were just too many things in my life I would not give up, and did not even know to give up.

We need to constantly challenge our thinking about what God expects of us. This is simply because we have a tendency to self-deception.

One aspect of God’s character that surprised me, and made me rethink many things is found in [Matthew 19:3ff](#). This is the passage

Christians use to determine when divorce is permissible, and if remarriage is permissible. But in all that debate, which is not our point here, we can easily miss something of great value found in the words of Jesus, *“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.”*

The striking point is that during the time of Moses, God permitted divorce because of the hardness of man’s heart. If we say it plainly, it would be that the law of God, permitted divorce because men are so wicked that if divorce is not permitted, worse can happen.

Men are physically stronger than women in most instances. A man, with greater physical strength, can easily abuse a woman. And this is the sad commentary that goes on even in our day in almost any country or culture.

Can you imagine what a man would do if he could not divorce a woman? If that option is not open to him, he may resort to more terrible things. We have the shameful example of King Henry VIII who resorted to false charges and had his wife executed. From time to time, we hear of men murdering their wives, and the tearful response from the victim’s family is always, “But divorce is an option.” The cruel reality is that if men are not allowed to divorce their spouses, the murder of wives will spike.

The reason why God permitted divorce

(whatever we may want to accept as a viable reason), is that prohibition is worse; not because divorce is normal. This point set me to reflect more deeply about God's accommodation to human weakness.

There are quite a few examples of God accommodating our weaknesses, foolishness, or some other shortcomings. Let me name a few.

When Cain killed Abel, God condemned him to become a vagabond. But Cain pleaded with God, *"My punishment is more than I can bear... and whoever finds me will kill me."* In response, God ensured that he will not be killed by any blood-avenger ([Gen 4:11-15](#)).

Beginning with Adam, we do not have any suggestion that people ate meat. Adam and Eve were probably vegans or vegetarians. After Noah's flood, God gave permission for humankind to consume meat. ([Gen 9:3](#)). The taking of animal life to eat it was an accommodation after the flood.

When God wanted to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah on account of their sin, Abraham bargained with God not to destroy Sodom where his nephew Lot lived. He asked God to spare the city if there were fifty righteous people in it. And he bargained God down to ten righteousness people ([Gen 18:23-33](#)). God accommodated Abraham. Of course, we know it was eventually to no avail because Sodom did not have ten righteousness people in it. God in his great mercy delivered Lot from the destruction even when he was supposed to perish with the city.

We skip to the time of the judges and see Gideon who was too frightened to answer God's call for him to lead the people against their enemies. So he asked God to confirm the calling by making the fleece wet while the ground around it dry. When that happened, he asked for the opposite, that

the ground would be wet and the fleece be dry ([Judges 6:36-40](#)). God accommodated.

There is a big picture of God's accommodation in Calvin's theology which theologians are aware. Calvin points out God's [transcendence](#) and that almost all of what God does for us, starting with his revelation to us, were accommodations to our limitations. It is like when we try to explain something to a child. We use simple words and simplify things so s/he can understand. The theology of God's accommodation is clearly seen when God became human flesh in the person of Jesus. What is not recognized by many is that God also accommodates us in the day-to-day matters.

God's ideals for us do not change. They reflect his holiness and truth. At the same time, *"If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you"* ([Ps 130:3-4](#)). If God were to keep a record of our sins, who among us can endure his holy and just anger? The psalmist rightly asks. In addition, our fear of God is not based on his record of our wrongs, but on his forgiveness. We fear God because he forgives us.

This is powerfully seen in the life of Simon Peter after he denied Jesus three times. Peter had seen the resurrected Christ. He was glad for the resurrection, but he had given up on himself. "I go a-fishing" Peter said. Simon Peter has condemned himself. He was a fisherman when Jesus gave him the high calling to fish for men. When he decided to return to fishing, it was not a casual remark. It was said to James and John, his partners in the fishing business. They decided they would go with Peter.

They fished all night but did not catch anything. At the break of dawn, someone called out to them from the shore asking, "Have you food?" Meaning, "Have you caught any fish?"

"No," they replied.

"Cast your net to your right and you will find some," the stranger offered.

With nothing to lose, they cast to their right. And there was so much fish they could not haul in the catch.

This was a replay when Jesus first called them. They were fishing all night and caught nothing, had given up and were washing their nets. Jesus had them go back out into the deep of the lake to cast their net. And they had a huge haul of fish ([Lk 5:1-6](#)). John immediately recognized this person had to be Jesus. He told Simon Peter who knew John must be right. Peter wrapped on his outer garment and jumped into the water and swam or waded about 100 meters to shore.

When the disciples hauled their catch and came to Jesus, the first thing Jesus did was to feed them. After feeding them, Jesus turned to Simon Peter and asked, "*Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?*" (Referring to Peter's boat and fishing business.)

Jesus called him "Simon." Jesus was going back to the time when he was not yet renamed Peter the apostle. He was taking Peter back in time, so he was Simon once more. Next, he called him "son of Jonas." Perhaps Jesus meant no more than to bring Peter back to his starting point by referring to his father. Perhaps Jesus was using the name of Peter's father, which happened to be Jonas, to remind him of Jonah the prophet who fled from God's call to win the Ninevites.

Whatever the case, Jesus created this [déjà vu](#). He helped them catch fish, and he called Peter by his pre-appointment name "Simon." Then he asked, "*do you love me more than these?*" We will expand the dialog to clarify the meaning.

Jesus is saying, "Do you love me with a supreme love (Greek: *agapaō*) above all these?"

Peter replied, "Lord, you know I love you with the lower grade friendship love (Greek: *phileō*)." To which Jesus said, "Even with your friendship love, I want you to feed my lambs."

What is Peter saying? He is confessing to Jesus, "I know you deserve the supreme unconditional love (*agapaō*), but you know that all I have to offer you is a limited friendship love (*phileō*). You know I failed you. You know I denied you. I cannot say I love you with a supreme love."

Jesus asked Peter a second time, and Peter gave the same reply.

Something happened the third time. Jesus lowered the bar to accommodate Peter. He said, "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me with the friendship love?" At that, Peter was grieved. Some think Peter was hurt. I think it was a general but powerful feeling of sorrow than hurt pride.

Jesus was accommodating Peter.

Twice he asked Peter if he loved him with the love he deserves (*agapaō*). Twice Peter says he is only good for the friendship love (*phileō*). The text tells us that Peter was grieved not, less on account of his being asked a third time, and more of what he was asked the third time. "*Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me (phileō)?'*"

Peter could not rise to the supreme love that Jesus deserves. So Jesus lowered the bar for Peter, to the friendship love Peter offered. This is God's accommodation. Peter was grieved that Jesus had to come down to his level because he could not rise to Jesus' level.

And Peter, now sober about his own limitations, replied one more time, that his love is only a friendship love. And in remarkable divine accommodation, Jesus accepted Peter's imperfect love, and still called him to "Feed my sheep."

This is mind boggling!

Jesus knew Peter's heart. Peter was forever humbled by his denial of Jesus. He denied Jesus three times, and now Jesus asked him three times "Do you love me." Peter was in the habit of trying to over-deliver. Imagine Peter of the past. If Jesus had asked him "Do you love me with a friendship love?" Peter would have replied confidently that he loves Jesus with a supreme love. The reverse is now true.

It is not the words of Peter that we should be looking at, it is the heart of Peter.

Here we see a humbled and no-longer-confident Peter. He no longer dared to claim he loved Jesus with a supreme love. Perhaps at this time, he loved Jesus more than before. He just didn't know it.

Jesus asked Peter three times and Peter affirmed his love three times. Jesus is the wronged party. But in love, he reached out to Peter to offer him healing.

Jesus topped it off by recommissioning Peter: "Feed my lambs/sheep." Jesus had just fed his disciples (with fish and bread). Now, Peter was to feed the sheep. Jesus knew Peter would deny him when he first chose Peter. His call to Peter to be a fisher of men had not changed. He knew Peter's failure even before he called Peter that first time.

Many of us fail like Peter. We no longer dare to proclaim, "I love you supremely!" We wonder deep within us if Jesus still wants us. We ask if other Christians can accept us despite our failures. We no longer

see ourselves as worthy instruments for God's use. We are broken.

When we are broken it does not mean we are broken for God. We can be no more than sad broken individuals stripped of dignity and worth. But God chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. He takes what is broken and remolds us to become more like Jesus. He accommodates us, comes down to our level. But thanks be to God, he does not leave us in that broken state. He lifts us up again, and remakes us as he did Peter.

When we are low, God accommodates us. When God accommodates us, he lifts us up again.

Hallelujah!

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