**SLIDE 1 Merciful and Gracious**

Series: God Selfie

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Bumper:

Welcome to Southside, we are glad you’re with us today!

In 2001 an Australian man took a picture of himself with a busted lip and sent it to his friends to show off his injury.

In the message attached to the picture, he said, sorry for the focus of this picture is a selfie.

From that moment until now this word, **“selfie”** is now forever associated with a practice most of us have participated in!

**Southside Church Selfie -** challenge every week a new challenge**; this week your FAVORITE PERSON (back to school)**

**SLIDE 2 #southsidechurchselfie** be sure and **tag location as Southside Church** or **selfie@southsidechurchva.org**

Today we have a plethora of Selfies flooding social media, capturing moments in our lives as we attempt to portray the story of who we really are!

This phenomenon has increased in popularity to the point of extreme.

**SLIDE 3-6 Look at these extreme selfie’s** …… People have literally died trying to take the perfect selfie captured in extreme situations.

By the way we do not support risky behavior in our selfie challenge.

This fascination of self-portraits to capture the essence of who we are can be intoxicating.

You saw the many selfies I have taken over the past few years in the opening segment.

Maybe you noticed some of the extreme situations I have been in over the years.

**SLIDE 7** Like shopping with my wife.

**SLIDE 8** Sleeping while she drives.

**SLIDE 9** Or how about taking my grandson Ryan into the wild to get up close and personal with this beast in the great outdoors. **(Pause before reveal)**

**SLIDE 10** Ok…. maybe we were just looking around at the Bass Pro Shop. (**Bass pro shop reveal pic)**

You have to love a good selfie.

Through these self-portraits we are trying to display the essence of our lives.

Sometimes we are hoping to convince people of something we are not, by attempting to construct how we want others to see us.

Sadly, many times we are trying to fake people out by putting up a facade that we only wish was true about ourselves.

The airbrushed selfie image isn’t at times an accurate representation of who we really are.

While this may be true with us, I have good news for you today.

**This is Not so with God**

When God revealed His glory, He gave a portrait of His true self.

Did you know that several times in the Bible **God showed us His selfie**?

We have captured - in the pages of scripture, strategic encounters, where God presents a self-portrait displaying His true Character.

We find one of God’s selfies in the second book of the Bible titled Exodus chapter 33.

This wonderful part of our Bible captures the real historical events of God’s interaction with Moses and the birth of the nation of Israel.

To set some context here, Moses had accepted his call to deliver the Hebrew people from their bondage in Egypt.

Moses has confronted Pharaoh, asking him to let the people go and worship their God at the mountain of Sinai.

After nine denials to his request and ten plagues that forced Pharaoh’s hand, he relents and lets the people go.

Almost immediately, Pharaoh changes his mind and chases after the Hebrew people trapping them between the Egyptian army and the red sea.

This is where God preforms another mighty miracle, parting the red sea and allowing the entire group of Hebrew people to cross over on dry land.

Then in a display of force, while the Egyptian army was chasing after the people, God releases the sea immersing the army in a flood that removed the threat from the Israelites.

After this miraculous event, they come to the foot of the mountain Sinai and Moses goes up to meet with God on the mountain.

Moses spends forty days and forty nights on the mountain with God.

During this time, God gave Moses detailed instructions on how the Israelites should navigate their lives centered on a relationship with Holy God.

God hand carved two tablets containing the Ten Commandments and dictated the law that would bring life to this newly formed nation.

Then in the middle of their conversation, God instructs Moses to go back down to the people because they had lost focus.

In fact, while Moses was getting instructions from God, the people were forgetting who miraculously and mercifully led them to this place of worship.

Have you ever been guilty of this?

God does something amazing in your life and then when a little time passes you get distracted and lose focus. **(Pause)**

Moses came down he found the people had completely gone off the rails.

The people had forgotten the God who so mercifully and graciously rescued them from bondage.

Once order was reestablished, God invited Moses to meet with Him daily in a special tabernacle outside the camp.

In one of these conversations, God instructs Moses to take the people on to the land He was giving them; however, God thought it was too dangerous for him to be close, so he would watch from a distance.

**Because a Holy God cannot be close to a people with a rebellious heart.**

Moses pleaded with God to reconsider because His close presence was so glorious and comforting that he could not imagine life without the close presence of God!

**SLIDE 11** Moses was so bold as to say**." Exodus 33:15 ………. "If Your Presence does not go *with us,* do not bring us up from here.**

I want you to know as your pastor, I have prayed that same prayer many times.

I don’t want to go anywhere that God doesn’t go with me!

In fact, as a body of Christ, I don’t want us to move anywhere that God isn’t close to us!

God gives Israel an opportunity lean in or walk away and Moses boldly declares that he does not want take one-step apart from God’s presence.

With this affirmation, God graciously responds…

So you want me to go with you? Good, since you chose me I will do one better.

I will reveal to you my goodness and the essence of my character.

**I’ll give you a selfie.**

A glimpse of my glory and a description of who I really am!

You have to take some time to read this entire conversation between God and Moses it is powerful! You can find it in **Exodus 33:12-23.**

***God in His mercy and generosity chooses to forgive a people who continually forgets who He is and what He has done!***

God gave Moses specific instructions to prepare and go back up the mountain and the next day God would give Moses His Selfie.

Then the next day God placed Moses in a cleft in a rock, covered him with His mighty hand and when He passed by, God gave Moses a glimpse of His back and a selfie description of His true Character.

Look at God’s selfie with me in Exodus 34:6.

**SLIDE 12-13 Exodus 34:6-7 (NKJV) 6  And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, 7 keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty,* visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."**

What an incredible scene!

I find it amazing that the very first words of God’s audible self-portrait reveals that He is **merciful** and **gracious**.

You might be saying to yourself, what…..merciful and gracious? Really?

How can that be with all the trouble and hard things we see in our world?

**SLIDE 14** One of my favorite movies is the gladiator; it is a story of Maximus a Roman general who was betrayed by the son of the emperor.

After the son of the emperor murdered his father, Maximus was forced to escape his pending execution.

This led him to becoming a slave forced to fight in the arena as a gladiator.

Maximus learns that his talents in the arena could earn him a right to face the new emperor in Rome who happened to be the son of the emperor who betrayed him.

He was told if you win the crowd, you will win your freedom.

There is a dramatic scene where Maximus is trying to win the crowd by looming over the person he was about to defeat.

If the crowd cried for mercy and the emperor put his thumb up, then the person doomed to die would receive mercy.

If the crowed cried for vengeance and the emperor put his thumb down then the person was killed.

Mercy was granted through the cry of the people and the uplifted thumb of the emperor.

I’m afraid that we have replaced God’s portrait of Himself with this kind of picture and we misunderstand the true character of God!

There are times we behave like the crowd crying out to God wondering why He is not putting His thumb in the air bringing mercy.

When you look at the world, through an **improper portrait of God** you can easily see the bad things happen and wonder why God is not doing something.

* Mass shootings that steal away precious lives
* When an innocent child dies
* When you receive a life altering diagnosis
* When a relationship goes off the rails
* Trial trouble difficulty

When we have the **wrong portrait of God,** we can be left feeling like the crowd crying out for mercy waiting for Him to move His thumb.

This can leave us in a place where we ask, **“God where are you?”** Why does it seem that God is sometimes silent?

In fact, one of the biggest hurdles to believing in God is this question, ***“why would a God of Love, who is supposed to be full of mercy allow Bad things to happen?”***

I think it is important during times like these to be reminded of the **selfie God has given us:**

**SLIDE 15 Difficult times and tragedy don’t disqualify God from being merciful and gracious!**

Sometimes that is when He shows up un-expectantly.

I have personally being walking this journey the last few weeks.

When you bury a five year old child that has found such a place in your heart, it produced some really big questions!

I’ve had questions so big, that if **my only point of reference** was the **question itself** and **the cry of my emotions**, then I would be **crushed by the weight of it.**

 Questions like:

* God, why would you have us give two years of our lives to protect this child if he was going to die anyway?
* God, why would you allow this to happen?
* Was this in your plan?

Big questions that in and of themselves are impossible to answer.

But praise God, the **questions and cry of my emotions are not my only point of reference!**

I have walked with God long enough to know He is merciful and gracious.

So when tragedy comes I know my God is bigger than my questions!

God gives us a bigger perspective, and a portrait of Himself.

The story of God as captured through the Bible shows us a God who was merciful and gracious as He pursued His people.

In fact, in my own life as He has demonstrated mercy and grace when I wasn’t deserving of it.

And God has pursued me and been with me, revealing time and time again that He is Good!

He is merciful and gracious, and He is with us even when we wrestle through the biggest questions of our life.

When I began to take these questions to God He reminded me personally that **He didn’t make the world this way.**

In fact, He brought me back to the beginning, reminding me that He made the world good, evil was not a part of His original design.

**He created life;**

Death is the absence of life. Death was not His desire for any of us.

Because God is love, and He wanted us to experience the fullness of His love, He gave us the gift of free will. Along with that gift came responsibility.

Unfortunately, humanity used that freewill gift to turn away from God and believe the lie that God cannot be trusted.

That choice brought the consequence of death into our world when humanity invited evil into the equation.

Sin, not God, invited death into the picture.

But sin does not undo God’s mercy and graciousness.

**Romans 5:20 (NIV) 20  ……But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,**

God reminded me that nothing done in His name will ever be wasted even though I may not see the results on this side of eternity.

God’s perspective is bigger than my questions.

As we faced Zion’s tragic death, I was reminded in a powerful way that…

**God’s response to difficult times and tragedy proves His mercy and graciousness.**

I wish I could take you on the journey I have walked over these past five weeks.

I wish you could see and experience what I have experienced.

**Now I need to go on record and say, I am not a super human!**

I have been walking a road of deep grief and pain over these past five weeks.

I have wrestled with God with my questions, and needed help to navigate.

In the moments immediately after we received the news of Zion’s death, I began leaning into the Lord with every hard question I had.

Then in an amazing outpouring from the body of Christ, I began to receive calls from individuals I have opened my life to.

* **My small group** – My small group leader to meet us – they organized meals
* **Prayer Video My friends** – Call’s from Tracy Spaur, Jerome Hancock, and Phil Fuller **(portion of prayer recording)**
* **My fellow pastors** – all our staff spoke into my life- picked up the slack
* **Many of you** – people offered help – funding – cards of encouragement

God reminded me that if you invest in the lives of others, when you need it, they will invest in you!

Your investment creates a well of ministers who can later minister to you.

This is why small groups are so important; this is why opening your life to others is so important.

Through these encounters, God was reminding me of all of His goodness, His mercy and His graciousness.

His **selfie proved true** in the **face of my tragedy** and questions.

When God met with Moses, He was declaring who He was.

But God didn’t just use words, He backed up His words with action.

From the beginning of time, God has been declaring who He is, and then backing up His words with action.

We have seen throughout the story of God how:

**SLIDE 16 God demonstrated mercy and graciousness by showing up in our mess.**

When we make our own mess, God steps in.

Adam and Eve chose to reject God’s provision for life by disobeying God’s clear boundary deciding for themselves what they believed was good.

**God stepped in.**

In His mercy and generosity, He provided clothing, then made a way for an ongoing relationship.

When messes happen to us, **God steps in**.

Humanity turned its back on God completely and Noah and his family were left as the only worshippers of God.

**God stepped in.**

In His mercy and generosity, He provided a way for Noah, his family, and the animals of the earth to be saved.

God allowed life to continue and flourish.

Many years later, God made a covenant with Abraham to provide a lasting presence in the mess of humanity.

God promised a descendant who would come to usher God’s presence into our mess in a supernatural way.

It does not matter **if you are in a mess someone else created** or if **you are the one who created the mess** - our God is merciful and gracious.

**God steps into the mess.**

Throughout the ages God has shown up saying, “I’m right here!”

In the passage we read today, the people of Israel had just rebelled and built a golden calf to worship.

God stepped in, renewing His commitment to lead them to a promised land.

When you continue to read the story of God you will find again and again that He shows up!

That’s not all because:

**SLIDE 17 God demonstrated Mercy and graciousness by creating guardrails that lead to abundant life.**

God’s desire for us is to **have life**, so He is **offering us a way of life** that includes His presence with blessing.

God has clearly given guardrails.

If we heed His instruction, we can have a life full of abundance and peace even when we face difficult times.

The Law was a gift from God, given to the nation of Israel so they could know His ways and character.

Many of us would look at these laws and consider them restrictive, missing the real message behind them.

A relationship with God is not a list of do’s and don’ts.

When you reduce your relationship to a list - you miss the essence of the heart of God.

Behind every - **shall not** – there is a **“shall”** - backed up by a **“who”** - that wants the best life for you.

Again God’s selfie of goodness coming through His mercy and graciousness.

And it was this God who kept pursuing us until -

**SLIDE 18 God demonstrated mercy and graciousness by breaking the curse.**

The ultimate act of mercy came through God who delivered on His promise to send His one and only son Jesus, to become the sacrifice breaking the curse on our lives forever.

God’s pursuit never stops; He **went to the cross** to demonstrate His mercy and grace.

His provision for life never stops; He sent His Spirit to write the law upon our hearts.

We do not have to live according to a list. We get to have the **Spirit of God** in us **as a guide who helps** us live a life founded on the law of love.

In our mess, God steps in, He provides a way of life, and then He offers to break the ultimate curse of death in your life through His mercy and grace.

We still have the free will to either choose to receive this grace and accept His goodness in our lives, or not.

We may not be able to escape the difficulty that will come because the curse of death and consequences still exist.

But we can have within us a power that will carry us all the way to the end.

Giving us perspective, while we are waiting for our forever home, where there is no more curse.

**So what do we do?**

**SLIDE 19 Cling to the selfie God has given us**. Don’t keep looking at your own picture of God. It’s probably not accurate.

It’s probably blurred by your own misconceptions and the misconceptions of others. Instead, replace it with the selfie God has given of Himself.

**SLIDE 20 Bring God your mess.** It does not matter how the mess was created bring it to Him anyway.

He cannot redeem that which we hold tight to our chest. We must willingly release it to Him.

I know for me as I went to God during my big questions about Zion.

I was asking God why would you have us care for him for two years trying to protect him and then let him die?

God gently spoke to me out of His goodness.

Wynne during those two years you and Caryl loved him, you read my words to him every day.

Because of this, when Zion crossed the threshold of death and met me, he recognized me because your revealed my selfie to him!

God has given us a perfect selfie; He is the God who is merciful and gracious.

Have you embraced the God of Mercy and Graciousness?

Today you can.

**Let’s pray!**

Response

* Need mercy pray?
* You got a mess bring it to the cross
* Feel like you’re in the dark then light a candle
* Need healing be anointed