

BAD RELIGION AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT GOD - Part two

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BAD RELIGION BELIEVES THERE ARE MANY DIFFERENT WAYS TO APPROACH THE TRUE GOD

Last week we examined the first foundational mark of bad religion - that *God is whatever you conceive Him to be*. This is the sin of remaking our creator God in our own user friendly image. I say this is the *foundational lie* about God because it is the *first* sin we commit and because it is the incubator for all the sins that follow: **Romans 1:22-23** - "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

The subject of today's message - lie number two - is slightly different. If the first lie has to do with *defining* God, this second lie has to do with *approaching* God. And the second lie says the *manner* of approaching God is determined by *us*. The second lie says it doesn't matter *how* we come to God, just so long as we *come*.

And here's something important to note: While these two lies are different, they are certainly related. Once you redefine God - once we remake Him into a God very much like us, only a little better - then naturally it gets much easier to approach Him in any way at all. In other words, once the holiness and transcendence has been safely detoxed out of God's being, we can be in charge of how we will make our approach to Him. If God is *defined* by popular consensus He can be *approached* by popular consensus.

But before we go too far, let's look at some relevant Scriptures:

Genesis 4:1-5 - "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." [2] And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. [3] In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, [4] and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, [5] but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell."

Notice the real subject of this passage. Cain is *not* worshiping the wrong God. He is not bowing to an idol. Cain's sin is much more carefully defined. He is not coming to the wrong *God*. He is coming to the true God in the wrong *way*.

Who cares how God is approached? Apparently God cares a great deal. Look at another passage with me:

Leviticus 10:1-3 - "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. [2] And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. [3] Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said, 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.' " And Aaron held his peace."

Here again we see the same pattern. Nadab and Abihu weren't coming before an idol. They weren't worshiping a *false* God. They were coming to the God of Israel - Yahweh - the Creator of all. But they were coming in the *wrong way*. They thought they could come on their own terms rather than God's.

And in each of these two Scriptural cases we find something our world has a hard time accepting: *God is intolerant of Cain's sacrifice. God is intolerant of Nadab and Abihu's worship*. We find that all worship isn't the same in God's eyes.

There is something else important here. You can see it especially clearly in the story of Cain and Abel. There is nothing in the text to indicate that Abel was a better person than Cain. No one said Cain wasn't as *sincere* as Abel, or that Cain *didn't believe in God* as much as Abel did. We would all love to be able to step back from the text with the discovery that Cain was somehow less devoted, or less honest - that somehow there was *another* reason in the make-up of Cain himself for God's rejection of his sacrifice. But there is nothing of the sort to be found in the text.

The rejection of Cain has nothing to do with *Cain's person*. It has to do with *God's pronouncement*. And we hate that because we think of people in terms of their rights and prerogatives. We find it almost annoying that *God makes absolutely no attempt to justify Himself here*. He simply lays the ground rules. He sets out His own requirements *plus nothing else* as the measuring stick for what He accepts and what He rejects.

Transcendence. That's the theological word for it. God is trying to train and establish their understanding of His **transcendence** - His **separateness** - His **distinctness** from everything else. This is made very plain in Moses' explanation to Aaron and the people about the reason for the still warm, struck down bodies of Nadab and Abihu:

Leviticus 10:3 - "Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said, 'Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified.' " And Aaron held his peace."

Underline those words - "**By those who come near Me I will be sanctified....**" God's not addressing atheists here. He's talking about those who want to draw near to Him. He's talking about those who would approach Him. He says the tendency is to forget that He's **holy**. **Modern churches work overtime to make God more chummy, casual and approachable.** The Holy Spirit takes an entirely different approach. Even though God is approachable **through Christ Jesus**, and even though God is **merciful, loving** and **forgiving** to the repentant, He wants - no, He **insists** - He be treated as **holy** - utterly **separate** from us - utterly **above** - utterly **removed** from our own judgments and assessments and opinions.

We should all be prepared to admit it - **We worship an intolerant God.** He doesn't take polls. He **defines** sin. He never debates it. Something **is** sinful simply because God **says** it's sinful. He never has to defend Himself to anyone. He bows before no human court of opinion. Jesus said God's Word will finally judge the whole universe - **John 12:48** - "**The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day.**"

Now, remember our subject through all of this. We're dealing with lie number two - "**There are many different ways to approach God.**" These two texts take the fact of God's holiness and sovereignty and **relate it to how this God is to be approached in worship.** And here's the point. He must be approached on **His** terms, not **ours**.

Having laid this basic understanding of the transcendence of God, let me very quickly list some contemporary sacrifices that, like Cain's, are also unacceptable to Almighty God:

1) **THE SACRIFICE OF SINCERITY**

The idea here is God receives anyone who **means** well. I may not follow God's instructions as revealed in His Word, but I am a good person who wouldn't hurt others and I mean well in all that I do. And surely God must accept me on that basis!

Certainly Cain's sacrifice is instructive here. There is nothing in the passage to indicate he possessed anything but a sincere heart. He wasn't out to **displease** God. He was out to **please** God. But sincerity is never enough. There are all sorts of situations where one can be sincerely wrong.

Again, God chooses to stress His transcendence - His divine Otherness from us. He alone chooses the terms on which He will be approached. This truth needs recovery in the contemporary church. Modern church marketing could well leave one with the impression that our job is to get the masses **pleased with God. But the Scriptures flip this around completely.** The issue in the Scriptures is always making sure our transcendent God is **pleased with us.**

Jesus stressed the same truth. It's not enough for worship to be "**in Spirit.**" It must also be according to "**truth.**"

2) **THE SACRIFICE OF GUILT**

The sacrifice of guilt is the very fuel of much of this world's religion. People have been ingrained with the idea that if they can somehow feel bad enough, if they can cause themselves enough emotional regret, if they experience enough inward suffering for their sins they can earn God's satisfaction and grace.

But there is an enormous difference between having **guilt feelings for sin** and **turning to Jesus Christ for grace.** Mourning over sin only has significance when it's coupled with receiving God's grace in Christ Jesus. Remorse, in itself, has no redeeming power. It is not a sacrifice God will accept.

3) **THE SACRIFICE OF WORKS**

Romans 9:30-33 - "**What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that**

is, a righteousness that is by faith; [31] but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. [32] Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, [33] as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame."

Notice, this is a passage about **two** seekers of God. Both want to know Him with all their hearts. But only **one** group is successful. It's not that one group sought God and the other didn't. It's not that one group was sincere while the other wasn't. And it's not that one group was wicked and the other righteous. That's not the distinction Paul draws at all.

One group made a fatal error. They sought to come to God through their own works. And they **did** good works. It's not that they tried to offer good, religious works, but failed. The problem wasn't their **failure** in their works. The problem was the **works themselves**.

The other group understood this. The other group used the "**corner stone**" the prophet Isaiah declared - Jesus Christ. They relied on Him rather than their own religious and moral righteousness. They didn't **trip over Christ** like the religionists. They **believed** and **entered** through Jesus Christ into fellowship with God the Father. **Works won't get anyone to God**. Works are a sacrifice God won't accept.

We need reminding of this because all our Christian life can gradually shift to a foundation of works that can't hold it up. Good works are the necessary **fruit** of the power of the gospel in our lives but they never **become** the gospel itself. Sometimes the whole **WWJD** movement comes very close to forgetting this. Our of the 7 billion people on this planet, no one will get to heaven by **doing** what Jesus did. We are saved by relying not on what Jesus **would** do but by what He **has** done that can't be repeated by anybody. That's the rich soil in which good deeds grow out of a grateful love for Christ rather than mere morality.

Now let's wrap this all up:

4) **WORSHIPING AN INTOLERANT GOD AND THE CALL OF RADICAL DISCIPLESHIP**

At a state university a sign reads, "***It's OK for you to think you are right. It's not OK for you to think someone else is wrong.***"

No sermon in the world could better explain the moral mess of our day. Relativism is the most prominent manifestation of the fall in our modern times.

These two marks of bad religion - "God is whatever you conceive Him to be", and "There are many different paths to the true God" - are the devil's most successful hold on gullible, non-biblical minds.

Perhaps this is why the Scriptural call to discipleship **begins** with a radical repudiation of both of them. God comes **pre-defined**. In fact, He is the foundational reality that establishes and defines everything else. Truth always has its opposite. If God's Word is truth, anything that contradicts it is a lie. If God's character is good, anything that opposes His will is evil. Theological truth is like mathematical truth. There is only one right answer, but there are thousands of wrong ones.

The first duty of those who love God is to say yes to Him. The second duty is to say no to everything else. The first part is easy. It costs absolutely nothing, but by itself saves no one. It's the second part (saying no to everything else) that will cost plenty in this world. That's because our world will tolerate same-sex marriages, but will never tolerate absolute Biblical truth. This is the radical and costly call of true discipleship.

In a world full of sincere followers of other religions Jesus stood and openly declared "***I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.***" Only the narrow path leads to God. The broad path always takes travelers in the opposite direction. It's the narrow truth that sets us free.