

BAD RELIGION AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT GOD - Part threeSunday, July 1st, 2012, 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #1572

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BAD RELIGION BELIEVES IF GOD EXISTS, HE IS MORE TOLERANT TODAY THAN HE WAS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Every once in a while there is a clever argument that is raised against traditional standards of Christian holiness. It is frequently used by activists for gay rights. The argument goes like this: ***"The penalty for homosexuality in the Old Testament was death. Do you still think we should execute homosexuals? And if you don't believe what the Bible says, then don't use it to back your argument!"***

But there is a point here that Christians must come to terms with and be able to **communicate** to this critical, relativistic world. After all, in the previous message in this series I referred to the account of Nadab and Abihu. God struck them dead for offering **"strange fire"** on His altar (**Leviticus 10:1-3**). But we don't see that kind of thing happening anymore.

In fact, there are about a dozen sins that were considered **capital offences** in the Old Testament. All sorts of things, from homosexuality to adultery, from cursing your parents to practicing sorcery or witchcraft, even blaspheming God was punishable by death.

So what about it? Being that people aren't executed for any of these sins today, is it true that God is more loving, more patient, more tolerant today than He was back then? Or let me put the same question in a slightly different form: ***Is it safer for us to sin in our age than it was in Old Testament times?*** Can conduct that was so strongly punished in the Old Testament be engaged upon today with the sure knowledge that God will be accepting and shower us all with unconditional love?

Those are difficult questions. And they're made even more difficult by the apparent **silence of God** in the face of the commitment of these sins minute by minute, hour by hour, and day by day by multiplied millions of people all over the world. ***How are we going to explain God's silence?*** Is God indifferent? Is He merely biding His time? Or has He fundamentally changed in His nature?

Let's start to unwrap this difficult issue:

1) **THE BIBLE CONSTANTLY DESCRIBES A GOD WHO IS UNCHANGING IN HIS NATURE AND WAYS**

Whenever you are faced with a difficult question, start with what you are sure of first. Then work out to the edges of the problem. Here is something we know for sure about our Creator God:

Psalm 90:2 - "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God."

From everlasting to everlasting God is just **God**. He is always just what He is, meaning His **nature** does not change. The New Testament restates the same grand truth - **James 1:17** - "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

But there's more. There are **implications** that follow from this unchanging God. Perhaps most important is His **truth** does not change either - **Psalm 119:89 & 152** - "Forever, O Lord, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens....152...Long have I known from your testimonies that you have founded them forever."

And there's still more. God's **holiness** does not change. Both the Old and the New Testament repeat the exact same standard, stated in exactly the same words: **Leviticus 11:44** - "For I am the Lord your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy...." And **1 Peter 1:16** - "....You shall be holy, for I am holy."

2) **WHILE GOD REMAINS TOTALLY UNCHANGED, HOW HE ADMINISTRATES JUSTICE AND JUDGMENT HAS CHANGED FROM OLD TO NEW TESTAMENT TIMES**

We'll just start on this point tonight and finish it up next Sunday night. We need to take a bit of time with this because there are important truths here that many Christians never take the time to think through. God's standards have **not** changed. His thoughts about righteousness and holiness have **not** changed. But His way of **relating** to us while here in this world **has** changed under the New Covenant.

Many Christians have a hard time relating to the whole Old Testament revelation simply because they don't understand this truth. They mistakenly come to the conclusion that the Old Testament must be somehow an **inferior** revelation of God, or that the God revealed in the Old Testament is **different** from the God of the New Testament. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

There is a much better explanation. Justice can be administered in different ways during different dispensations. The standard itself is **unchanging**. But the **administration** of justice can certainly vary.

Let me illustrate this truth on a very simple, basic level. Imagine with me a four year old boy stealing some candy from the store. His father finds out and chooses to give his son a spanking. The punishment is **immediate** and **physical**. If that same boy repeated the same offence again at age twelve the father may take the child back to the store to **return** or **pay for** the stolen candy. Then, while he may not

spank the boy, he may choose some other form of punishment - the removing of an allowance or the removal of some privileges. If the same son, say at age twenty-two, steals again, there may not come any *immediate* consequences for his actions, pending a *future date in court*.

Notice, the first punishment is *immediate* and, at least in the four year old's eyes, very *painful*. The last punishment, while neither *immediate* or *physically painful* is far more serious and of longer standing consequence.

Now here's the point that's very relevant to our discussion. At no point in this whole process did the parents' view of crime change with the passing of years. But the child's infraction was *dealt with differently* from one period to another. In fact, rather than *lessen* the seriousness of the offence as the child grew older, his crime exacted a far more *serious* result.

Here's what we're going to see in the remainder of this message. At no point has God's attitude toward human sin changed. His judgments against all sin and wickedness remain constant. But there has come a Biblical change both in God's *timetable* and God's *method* of punishment.

3) THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOD'S DEALINGS WITH SIN UNDER THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS

The key passage of Scripture here is Hebrews 12:18-29 - "For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest [19] and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. [20] For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." [21] Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." [22] But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23] and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, [24] and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. [25] See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. [26] At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." [27] This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. [28] Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, [29] for our God is a consuming fire."

The change in God's administration of His absolute justice can be seen in *three contrasts*: the *earthly versus the heavenly*, second, the *old covenant versus the new covenant*, and finally, the *immediate judgment of God versus His future, eternal judgment*. We'll look at just the first of these three tonight:

Let's look at each of these quickly:

a) *The earthly versus the heavenly point of contact with God*

Hebrews 12:18-21 - "For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest [19] and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. [20] For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." [21] Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear."

This is the command of God being given to Moses for the people on Mount Sinai. The emphasis is on the *distance* between God and man. No one, not even the animals, can come near the mountain. If they do, they will die. The darkness, the fire, the smoke, all serve to underline the *unapproachability* of our Creator God by sinful creatures.

Sinai was God's presence without *atonement*. It is the sheer, unveiled, awesome glory of God as it must be witnessed by sinful people. See that burning fire? See that death-producing Presence on the mountain that must be avoided to stay alive? That is the perfect picture of *sinful man standing within the range of God's holiness*.

Now comes a striking contrast: Hebrews 12:22-24 - "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, [23] and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, [24] and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

The important point in these verses mustn't be missed. And it must not be *misinterpreted*. We are not approaching a *different God* in these verses. But we are approaching a holy God *through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ*. We come to a holy God, but

through the *“sprinkled blood” of Jesus Christ.*

Sinai was **closed off to all** because no one keeps the law perfectly, and sinners can't come to God unatoned. There is only death if they do. But the heavenly Mount Zion (representing the presence of God in heaven itself) is open to all who come through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

But the question still remains: ***Does this mean God's hatred for sin has now been changed into love? Has Christ's coming and His death made Father God more tolerant toward sin?***

While we haven't answered that question yet, the answer we'll unpack next week is, ***“No. God hasn't somehow evolved His just wrath into love. Jesus died to prove that.”*** Without the cross of Jesus Christ as an **atonement sacrifice** made for our sins all you have in Christianity is God encouraging us that love is nicer than hatred and goodness better than badness.

But what about the badness? What about the badness committed against a holy God? What about all the good examples of love and non-retaliation we've already ignored down through the centuries? We all **know** that good examples don't always create good people.

No. Jesus died to effect an actual change in a broken relationship between a holy God and sinful people. God's wrath against sin didn't just evaporate in the New Testament. It was spent. God remains consistently loving and consistently holy at the very same time. This is the divine genius of Biblical redemption. Next week we'll look at the last two of the three great contrasts in this passage from this text in Hebrews.