

**BAD RELIGION AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT GOD - Part four**Sunday, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2012, 6:00 p.m. - Teaching #1575

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

Last week we began looking at some of the arguments raised against traditional standards of Christian holiness. I mentioned that 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!"*

We saw that 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?

Then we turned our attention to a rather long, involved text in **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 point we began unpacking was that, while *God* never changes, the way he deals with our sins *has* changed. The New Covenant brought about a fundamental change in the way God *presently* (important word) responds to the wickedness of this present age.

In the third point of last week's teaching we began examining the differences in the way God deals with sin comparing the old and the new covenants. We looked at the first of *three changes* last Sunday night. These changes are changes in God's administration of His absolute justice. Remember, His *justice* hasn't changed. But the writer of Hebrews does point out three changes in how God's justice is *presently* (important word) *administered*. These changes are presented 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*.

Last Sunday night we studied the *first* of these three contrasts - the contrast between the *earthly and the heavenly point of contact with God*. The contrast in **verses 18-23** is between Mount Sinai and the heavenly Mount Zion. Mount Sinai is God's revealed will without *the atonement*. The emphasis is on the unapproachability of God. Holy people can only get God's will *second hand* - mediated through Moses.

Mount Zion is a picture of the worship point of the redeemed. These are people who don't stand in their own righteousness. They aren't just Jews. These are people from every nation and people group. These people aren't perfect, yet. But God has poured out His grace.

Now we turn our attention to the second and third contrast in our text - the *old covenant versus the new covenant*, and finally, the *immediate judgment of God versus His future, eternal judgment*. So, continuing from last week, these are points **3b** and **3c**:

b) ***The Old Covenant versus the New Covenant***

**Hebrews 12:24** - *"....and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*

A lot of issues come out of this single verse. If there is a *new* covenant, there must also be an *old* covenant. And then, secondly, how is the *new* one better than the *old*?

Obviously, we need to understand the *old* covenant before we're going to be in a good position to see the greatness of the *new*. Here were the terms of the Old Covenant: God made this covenant with the nation of Israel. Beginning with Abraham He chose to rule them *directly* through divinely appointed judges, prophets, and kings. God would tell the leaders *directly* what he wanted them to do and they would govern the people directly by this first hand revelation from God.

In other words, and this is *very* important, *there was absolutely no distinction and no separation between religion and state, between worship and government*. Because God ruled the whole nation directly, religion and state were virtually the same thing. Their authority

was absolutely **congruous**. They were identical with each other. The God of their religious faith was also the Ruler who made all their laws. Priests and Police were of the same direct divine intervention. This kind of theocracy has never been repeated.

Now there were very practical implications from this in the Old Testament. There was no such thing as **freedom of religion** among God's people. "You shall have no other gods before me" wasn't just a **principle**. It was **law**. Violators weren't just **unwise**. They were **executed**. Breaking God's commands wasn't viewed merely as forsaking some **religious** creed. God's commands were the **law base** of Israel's society and legal system. When people broke these commandments, they suffered immediate, judicial, legal punishment.

Now we are in a much better position to begin answering our question about whether or not God is more tolerant now than He was in the Old Testament. Stay with me:

Jesus came on the scene and really turned everything upside down far more than we can easily imagine. He came with **two new, very radical ideas**:

First, God would no longer deal with **one nation**, but would redeem individuals from **every tongue, tribe and nation**. Those redeemed people would come from diverse cultural backgrounds and vastly varied forms of earthly government.

Second, Jesus brought the radical idea that these people could follow Him and please Father God while they **remained citizens under very pagan governments**. This is what enraged the Jews and confused Jesus' own disciples. He made it very clear that He hadn't come to overthrow the corrupt Roman government. He told His own followers to pay taxes to Rome - **Luke 20:25** - "**He said to them, 'Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'**"

So something big and something new was happening through Jesus Christ. People from **all** nations could come to be God's own people - the church. And these people, once redeemed, never formed their own political structure, but lived their lives on earth as good citizens of all sorts of very wicked and godless governments. We now live in **two realms** in a way the children of Israel - God's old covenant people - never did.

In other words, the church does not **administrate the legal laws of the governments under which they live**. They don't transform the laws through any political structure or power. Politics isn't the mission of the New Testament church. God may call - and hopefully **many** will respond - **individual Christians** into political careers. But the job of the church is to **disciple Christians**. The job of those Christians is then to **reach the lost** and **function as salt and light** in all levels of society in all sorts of different cultures with all sorts of different laws.

But, and this is the key point, under the New Covenant, the people of God don't **enforce**, or even directly **create** the laws of the land.

**1 Corinthians 5:9-12** - "I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— [10] not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. [11] But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. [12] For what have I to do with judging **outsiders**? Is it not those **inside** the church whom you are to judge?"

We can and must discipline people **in** the church who profess Christ but openly and unrepentantly defy His will. But Paul is equally clear that it's not our business at all to get after those who break God's laws **outside** the church. The church is not a **legal** institution. We offer sinners God's transforming grace and occasionally discipline unrepentant Christians who profess Christ's Name.

Now we begin to see why we remove from fellowship those who refuse to follow Christ, but we don't function as the body who executes or imprisons those who are morally corrupt or wicked in this world. Under the New Covenant, that's not our calling.

"Well then, Pastor Don, what about God's holiness and justice? If nobody judges these sinners, can we now continue in sin and get away with it?"

This is where contrast number three comes in:

c) **Immediate physical judgment versus future, eternal judgment**

**Hebrews 12:25-27** - "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." There is no missing the message of these verses. If God judged those who turned away from Him when He gave the law at Mount Sinai, how much greater will His judgment be for rejecting His love and grace from Mount Zion! The Jews who didn't hear His voice didn't enter the earthly promised land. Their primary punishment was physical death.

But as the revelation of God's grace unfolds under the new covenant so do the consequences of **refusing** or **abusing** that grace. As

greater and greater grace is revealed and rejected, the punishment is *delayed* but more *severe*. God usually *doesn't* strike people dead in their wickedness today. And because He doesn't, many *think* He is more tolerant than He used to be. But this is an eternally fatal mistake:

**Romans 2:5** - "But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."

God's wrath can't be *dodged*. It can only be *stored up* and *delayed*. To careless people grace always gives the illusion of tolerance. The New Testament writer of Jude warned that grace, when not properly understood, always leaves the door open for license:

**Jude 4** - "For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ."

But the real reason for God's delay in judging sin is much more tender and much more profound: **2 Peter 3:9** - "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

We still need to remember Mount Sinai. We should never *live* there. But we should regularly *look* there. Look at Mount Sinai and behold your sin in the presence of a holy God. Then come to Mount Zion, look at the millions of angels and justified saints glorifying God through Christ Jesus, and ravish your heart all over again in the amazing grace we've received through the blood of the Cross.