

“The Lord’s Jealousy,” 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 (January 19, 2013)

¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? ¹⁹ What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. ²² Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

PRAY

We are working our way through the book of 1 Corinthians and we’ve made it to chapter ten, verse 14. Chapters eight, nine, and ten of 1 Corinthians form one block of thought – whether or not it’s appropriate for Christians to eat in the idol temples. We’ve talked about this a lot over the last few months – I won’t go again over why this was such an issue.

But suffice it to say that Paul says, “No, it’s not appropriate.” Why? It is idolatry. He says that when you come together as a church and you take the Lord’s Supper, you participate in the worship of Jesus Christ. One bread, one body. In the old covenant, when the Jews ate at the temple in Jerusalem, they were participating in the worship of Yahweh, the God of the universe.

So when you go to the idol temples at eat their meat, what are you doing? You are participating in their worship, you are committing idolatry. Don’t do it, Paul says. You can’t worship God and participate in idol worship.

So, that’s pretty simple, and there’s not a lot of application for us in that, is there? If the message is only, “Don’t go to idol temples and eat the meat,” you can reply, “Okay, I won’t!” and that’s the end of the sermon. We’d go home real early today.

Obviously, we need to go beyond that – why is it precisely that Paul is so concerned that the Corinthians don’t participate in idolatry? He gives the answer in verse 22: “Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy?”

Idolatry, Paul says, provokes the Lord to jealousy – that’s why you Corinthians must not participate in it. And here, in verse 22, we see not only the key to keeping from idolatry, but the key to keeping oneself away from all sin and, indeed, the key to understanding what it means to be a Christian at all. It’s all in that word: “jealousy.”

Now I know that this adjective – jealousy – is not one we usually associate with God. It might even be for some of you an immediate turn-off when you hear it described of God

– like God’s wrath or God’s anger. But what I hope to show you is that through the jealousy of God we get insight that we can get no other way into the love of God.

Four things: first, the nature of a jealous God. Second, the demand of a jealous God. Third, the danger of a jealous God. Fourth, the hope in our jealous God.

First, the nature of God’s jealousy. Typically, if not all the time, when we think of the word “jealousy,” we think of negative connotations. We think of people who cannot be happy and the success and good fortune of others. We think of people who are controlling and manipulative and abusive. And we should think that, because most of the time when the Bible talks about jealousy, it talks about it in a negative way.

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,
²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,
²¹ envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. Galatians 5:19-21.

In the Bible, we see a very famous account of how jealousy absolutely ate up and destroyed a prominent biblical character. Saul was the king of Israel. He was handsome, he was a head taller than any other man in the nation. He led Israel to victory after victory over her enemies. But then someone else comes on the scene in Israel who is also handsome, and who is also a mighty warrior – David. And after David killed Goliath, the Philistine, we read this: ⁶ As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. ⁷ And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, “Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” ⁸ And Saul was very angry, and this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands, and what more can he have but the kingdom?” ⁹ And Saul eyed David from that day on. 1 Samuel 18:6-9. And the ESV doesn’t say it here but it’s implied and other translations spell it out: Saul didn’t just eye David; he kept a jealous eye on David, and his jealousy consumed him and cost Saul his kingdom and ultimately his life.

So, most of the time, jealousy is a bad, bad thing. Most of the time. But not all of the time. There is a different kind of jealousy mentioned in the Bible as well. Paul, writing his second letter to the church at Corinth, at one point writes this: “For I feel a divine [or a godly] jealousy for you ...” 2 Corinthians 11:2a.

There is a good, even godly, kind of jealousy. Jealousy, feelings of jealousy, are appropriate in some circumstances.

So, for example, a husband walks into a room and there sees his wife in the embrace of another man and engaged with him in a passionate kiss. What kind of feelings would be normal for a husband under those circumstances?

Say you had two different men who saw their wife with another man. One husband saw his wife in the arms of another man, and he just shrugged his shoulders, left the room, and sat down in front of a television somewhere and starts flipping through the channels. But the other husband saw this happening, sprinted over to them, pulled his wife away from the other man, and beat the other man so severely that he put him in ICU. Which response is more (and I don't know how else to put it than this) understandable in that scenario?

Now, I'm not condoning either reaction, and I'm certainly not condoning violence. There are certainly husbands out there who are unreasonably jealous of their wives and girlfriends, who are controlling, manipulative, abusive toward them. And there are some women like that, too. But as a pastor, as a counselor, and quite frankly, as a man, I would be more concerned about the emotional well-being of the man who didn't do anything than of the man who beat his wife's lover to a pulp. The lack of jealousy in that circumstance would be unnerving. Why?

Because when you are married, when you have entered into that kind of relationship with a woman (or, if you are a woman, with a man), you should appropriate feelings of jealousy – which is to say that the very thought of your spouse in the arms of another should make you sick to your stomach. You should want your spouse all to yourself, to share with no one else on the planet. That's good, that's right, that's godly jealousy.

You may think, “Well, J.D., that doesn't sound very godly to me.” Then, frankly, and with all due respect, you don't know your Bible very well. Because that kind of appropriate jealousy for another is exactly how God describes his relationship with his people. Exodus 20:5a (talking about idolatry):⁵ You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God ...”

Now, why is God jealous for the affections of his people? Because in the Bible, God consistently compares his relationship with his people to that of a husband with his wife. The nature of God's relationship with his people is covenantal – it's marital. So Isaiah 62:3-5: “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.⁴ You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her [Hephzibah], and your land Married [Beulah]; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.⁵ For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.”

God is married to his people, he loves his people, and so he's jealous for the affections of his people. The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, or the Canticles, whatever you wish to call it, is perhaps the most unnerving book of the Bible because it deals very frankly with the subject of sexual love between a man and a woman. For those of you who have attended traditional Southern Baptist churches, you know that every January they have the January Bible Study (it used to be the Winter Bible Study when I was a kid), where the convention chooses a book or part of a book of the Bible, and produces study materials on that book, and every Sunday night in January the people gather to study that

book. They've done this for decades and decades. But the Song of Solomon has not, nor will it ever be, the January Bible Study book. It's just too graphic, too uncomfortable to study in big groups.

But almost all commentators over the centuries have noticed that the Song of Songs is not just some kind of inspired sex manual. It also has allegorical properties to it that describe God's love for his people. And so when read the book like that some passages in the book jump off the page at you. Here are a few: "O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the crannies of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely." Song of Songs 2:14. "You are beautiful as Tirzah [a city in Israel], my love, lovely as Jerusalem, awesome as an army with banners.⁵ Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me..." Song of Songs 6:4-5a. "How beautiful and pleasant you are, O loved one, with all your delights!⁷ Your stature is like a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters.⁸ I say I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its fruit. Oh may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, and the scent of your breath like apples,⁹ and your mouth like the best wine." Song of Songs 7:6-9a.

And you say, "That's in the Bible?" Yes! Now, if you are here today and you are not a Christian, welcome, we are glad you're here. But I can understand it if right now you may think this idea of God being a lover is just weird, it may even at first hearing give you the creeps.

Granted – it's unusual to hear a Christian minister speak in such terms. But you must know this about Christianity – being a Christian does not mean that you enter into some kind of formal, transactional relationship with God, where if you do a certain amount of good things – pray, read your Bible, acts of kindness to other people – you can expect a transaction where God will give you a certain amount of blessing. It's not a transactional relationship.

Nor is it some sort of official, political relationship, where God is just the king up in heaven who is sovereign over the world, and you simply sign your name identifying with him in an official capacity. No.

When you enter into a relationship with God, you find yourself in a relationship with a jealous lover – in the best sense of those words. Now you may find that distasteful or unbecoming of religious belief or just too personal or intimate for you, but whatever else you think about that notion you can't say that the Christian God doesn't care about his people. You can't say that the Christian God doesn't feel for his people. You can't say the Christians God doesn't long for his people. And you can't say that the Christian God is like the gods of so many of the other world religions – impersonal, dispassionate, interested only in obedience and sacrifice and ethical living but not in a relationship. Because the God of the Bible is a jealous God. No other world religion even dares to make that claim – only Christianity.

Second, the demands of a jealous God. What does a righteously, and appropriately, jealous God demand of his people? The same thing a righteously jealous husband or wife

would demand of his or her spouse: faithfulness. God wants his people to be faithful to him.

And this gets us to how the jealousy of God keeps us, Christians, not just from idolatry, but from all sin. You see, there are two ways to try and fight sin. First, you can make a list of all the bad things you could possibly do, and then try to keep from doing them. The Bible says “do not lie,” so I won’t lie. The Bible says “do not covet,” so I won’t covet. The Bible says “do not lust,” so I won’t lust. The Bible says “do not worry,” so I won’t worry. The Bible says “do not be stingy with your money,” so I won’t be stingy. Make your list of bad things, and resolve not to do those bad things. That’s one way to try and keep from sin.

But as anyone who’s tried for one hour to approach sin that way knows, it doesn’t work! Why? Because what you need *in order to keep from sin is not rules, but a relationship.*

So, for example, say you felt led to go up to a complete stranger and make them happy. You don’t know why, but you just feel like you need to do it. So you go up to the person and say, “Hi, you don’t know me, but I have a job to do – I’m supposed to do the things you like, and stay away from the things you don’t like. So, would you just make me a list of all the things you like and the things you don’t, and every day I’ll do my best to do those things you like – so maybe you’ll regularly find gifts from me at your door or your car washed in your driveway or your clothes cleaned a certain way – and I’ll do my best to avoid the things you dislike. But we won’t have a relationship – we will never talk, we will never interact, we will never enjoy each other’s company. I’m just going to do the things on this list.” Would anyone ever do that?

No! No one would ever do that with another human being, but if someone did try they would find that they couldn’t keep it up for more than a week or two. After a while, they would say, “Why am I knocking myself out to please someone whom I don’t even know?”

And for so many people that’s what Christianity feels like – they don’t know God, so they ask themselves after a while, “Why am I doing all this? I’m keeping all these rules about sex and money and going to church and reading my Bible and serving others, but I don’t even really know if God exists. My parents went to church, my wife goes to church, my co-workers goes to church, God seems real to them, but this feels like a complete waste of time to me.”

But say you meet someone and fall madly in love with them. It’s happened to many of us, and it’s a wonderful thing. When you fall head over heels in love with someone, what do you want to do? Whatever they like to do. You make it your goal to please them. You want to make them happy. You want to see them smile.

So what you do is you spend time with them. You talk to them, you listen to them. And through that relationship over time you find that you know the person so well that instinctively, without thinking, you know how to please them. You know their likes, you

know their dislikes. And you don't need a list, do you? You don't need the rules anymore, because your happiness is found inside of their happiness. You don't need rules for them any more than you need rules to tell you what makes you happy.

The demands of a righteously jealous God and an appropriately jealous spouse are the same: faithfulness, nurtured through relationship. Paul says, “⁹ So whether we are at home or away, *we make it our aim to please him.*” 2 Corinthians 5:9. Everyone wants to please their lover, so you must have a relationship with God in order to meet his demand.

But that begs the question: what will happen to us when we are unfaithful to a jealous God?

Third, the danger of a jealous God. What will happen if we are unfaithful to God? Well we know what happened to Israel when she was unfaithful to God under the old covenant. In the books of Deuteronomy, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah over and over again we hear God talking like a wounded, angry lover, because his people, the people of Israel, have cheated on him. They have abandoned the worship of Yahweh, the God of the Bible, and they have instead participated in the worship of idols. He's found them in the arms of other lovers, and he is jealous.

But the most graphic place in the Bible where we read what happens to people who are unfaithful to God is the book of Ezekiel, especially chapters 16 and 23. Now I will probably never preach from Ezekiel 23 because it's so graphic. If you want to see why I say that, go home and read it this afternoon. I'll probably never read it in public. But I will read a portion of Ezekiel 16, even though Charles Spurgeon said, “A minister can scarcely read it in public!”

I won't read the raciest parts, though, but what I will read is bracing enough. God is speaking through the prophet Ezekiel to his people, to Israel, and this is what he says: ³⁵ “Therefore, O prostitute [he calls his people a prostitute, he's so angry at their unfaithfulness], hear the word of the LORD: ³⁶ Thus says the Lord GOD, Because your lust was poured out and your nakedness uncovered in your whorings with your lovers, and with all your abominable idols, and because of the blood of your children that you gave to them, ³⁷ therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side and will uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness. ³⁸ And I will judge you as women who commit adultery and shed blood are judged, and bring upon you the blood of wrath and jealousy ... ⁴² So will I satisfy my wrath on you, and my jealousy shall depart from you. I will be calm and will no more be angry.” Ezekiel 16:35-38, 42. We know that a few years later the Babylonian Empire came in from the north and attacked Israel and carried the people of Judah off into exile; that's what happened Israel for her unfaithfulness to God.

But what will happen to us? It's not like that if we go on sinning long enough at Grace Bible Church the Canadian Mounties will swoop down on us from the north and carry us off to exile in Winnipeg. Instead, the Bible says this: every time we sin we commit

adultery against God, we cheat on God. Every time we look to money to make us happy, or our careers to satisfy us, or even to our families to fulfill us, and certainly every time we lie, lust, steal, shout in anger, and slander, God finds us in the arms of another lover. He is justly angry at us for our sins. And if we persist in our sins and refuse to turn to God, he won't send the Canadians. Instead, we will find ourselves on judgment day at the end of the age facing the righteous, holy wrath of a jealous, angry God.

Now, I don't know how that lands with you but I've got to imagine that some of you out there hear that and conceptualize God as some kind of hostage-taker. He's holding a gun to the head of the people of the world and saying, "Unless you love me and serve me, I'll send you to hell." No, that's not what's going on.

The adultery analogy, the analogy between God and a human lover breaks down at that point. You don't owe any human being your faithfulness, not like this, not from birth. But you owe God your faithfulness, because God isn't just your jealous lover – he's your sovereign Creator. He made you for him. He has rights over you. We were made, the Bible says, in God's image, for a relationship, with him. We were made so that we can only be fulfilled only by him. We were made to be satisfied only in his arms. But if we refuse to come to him, God won't force our hand – he'll let us go to hell. And hell is, according to C.S. Lewis, the ultimate monument to human freedom.

And we all deserve hell, the Bible says, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We've all committed adultery against him. We've all been unfaithful. "We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way..."

I have to admit, I wrestled with this sermon more than any sermon in a while because it's hard to preach on the jealousy of God. I've never devoted a sermon to it before. Not only are there not a lot of resources out there on this subject, but it's hard to preach on it without just bumming everyone out. And it's also hard for me anyway to get from the jealousy of God to the gospel, the good news of, God.

But finally last night I remembered the prophet Hosea, and in the book of Hosea we find, fourth, the hope in a jealous God.

In the book of Hosea we read how God calls Hosea and says, "Go and take for yourself an adulterous woman for a wife." So Hosea does what God says – he goes and takes woman known for her immoral sexual relationships – her name was Gomer – and make her his wife. But then, just as God said she would, she left Hosea, for another man.

Yet God tells Hosea this (Hosea 3:1-3): And the LORD said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress, even as the LORD loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins [cakes of raisins were thought of as an aphrodisiac then]." ² So I bought her for fifteen shekels of silver and a homer and a lethech of barley [what does that mean? It means that Gomer has gotten in such dire financial straits that, rather than go back to Hosea, she's sold

herself into slavery].³ And I said to her, “You must dwell as mine for many days. You shall not play the whore, or belong to another man; so will I also be to you.”

Now, why in the world would God tell Hosea to go and marry an unfaithful woman, and then after she cheats on Hosea like everyone knew she would, why would God tell Hosea to buy her back from her slavery so that he could be her husband again?

The answer is that God wanted Hosea’s life to be a representation - a prophetic representation – of how God relates to Israel. Over and over and over again the people of Israel are unfaithful to God; they cheat on him. But over and over and over again God takes them back.

And then we read this in Hosea 11. In the first part of the chapter God is talking about how angry he is at Israel for her faithlessness, he’s frustrated with them, but then in verse 8 his tone completely changes, and he says, “How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zebaiim? [two cities totally destroyed earlier in Israel’s history] My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.⁹ I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.” Hosea 11:8-9.

What’s going on here? God is saying that when it comes to Israel he can’t help himself. Over and over again God’s people cheat on him, are faithless, they commit adultery and run around on him. Yet he is so in love with his people that no matter what they do he’s going to keep coming after them, keep chasing them down, keep loving them. In fact, there is nothing his people can do to make him stop loving them. He is that jealous for their affections. One commentator: “His affection weighs heavier than Israel’s ingratitude, and he cannot bring himself to renounce his people, even though they renounce him.”

To my mind, at this point, there are two questions: first, how *can* God love his people like that? We know the answer to that one. God is justly angry and his people for cheating on him, for their adultery, for their faithlessness to him. But rather than taking his jealous, righteous wrath out on his people the way a human husband might on his wife, God swallowed his anger. He forgave his people. Do you know how? God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to be a sacrifice of atonement. Jesus Christ – who was fully God and fully man. Jesus Christ was the representative for all God’s people, he stands in their place.

And when God poured his wrath out on Jesus Christ on the cross, he exhausted all the jealous anger he will ever have toward his people for their sins (that’s what John the Baptist talked about when he pointed at Jesus and said, “Behold, the lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world!”). Now, on this side of the cross, all that remains in God for his people is his love. That’s the hope in a jealous God – if you trust in Jesus Christ to reconcile you to God, then you can know with certainty that there is nothing you could ever do to keep God from coming after you and loving you.

The second question is tougher: *why would* God do that? Why does God put up with all that from his people? If we had a friend who was married to someone who was constantly cheating on him, would we counsel him to act in this way? Almost certainly not – we’d say, “Get out of this relationship! This is crazy!” We’d call someone who did that unstable. Why does God do it?

The answer is we really don’t know. It’s a mystery. We really don’t know why God loves his people the way that he does. We do know it’s not due to any reason arising out of the people themselves. R.C. Sproul is one of my favorite teachers, he’s taught at every different educational level you can for decades, and one time he said that of all the questions he’s been asked by students over the years, he’s still waiting for his first student to come to me and ask him: Dr. Sproul, I just don’t get it – why would God love me? We don’t know why God loves his people the way he does.

But I do know this – the more you see yourself for what you really are – a spiritual adulterer against God, faithless – the more you’ll understand God’s love for you. If you have a high opinion of yourself and your character and think, “Oh, of course, God must love me, he must think I’m great,” you won’t be able to see God’s love. But the more you see what’s really going on, how you really aren’t doing anything to merit God’s love, then you have the opportunity to see how God really loves you.

In Starkville, I was a member of a gym at the hospital there in town where, for whatever reason, every single elderly person in the city who wanted to exercise came to that gym. I was the youngest person in that gym by seventy years. And for the first year or two I was a member there, almost every morning I saw this older couple. They would leave just as I was getting there.

The wife was obviously in frail health, because she had to lean on her husband to even walk in and out of the gym. She would just drink coffee while he did his workout. But when winter rolled around she needed her husband for more than just a crutch. She needed him to dress her.

So I’d watch this two or three times a week. She would rest herself on the ping-pong table by the front desk, and he would put on her jacket. Then he would put on her gloves. Then he would tie a scarf around her neck, button her coat. And then he would help her out the door. But what always got me was that he had this huge smile on his face the whole time.

Why was he smiling like that? Was it because he was thinking about when they got home how she was going to do all these things for him to pay him back, cook him supper, take care of him? No – she couldn’t do anything. He was smiling because he just loved her – not for anything she could do for him, just because he loved her.

Now, maybe she had been an outstanding wife for fifty years, so this husband was more than glad to return the favor in their later years. I don’t know – but when it comes to our relationship with a jealous God, we can be sure that when God loves us *he’s not*

returning any favors. It makes no earthly sense for him to do it – in fact, it would make every earthly sense for God to have long since washed his hands of us. But he doesn't, he can't – he can't help himself. He loves us. And when you see how God loves you, when you begin to understand how he loves you, it changes you. You may not have been faithful before, and you'll never be completely faithful to him, *but you'll want to be. You'll wish you were. Your heart will break when you're not.*

“Take me to you, imprison me, for I except you enthrall me, shall never be free; nor ever chaste [pure], except you ravish me.” John Donne (17th century). God is a jealous lover who can't stop loving you, no matter what you do. A jealous lover who will never get angry at you because if Jesus Christ is your savior, then all his anger is gone, leaving only a love that will never fail. That's hope for us, hope to change, hope to be like him. Amen. Let's pray together.

Father, we confess that though you are faithful, we are faithless. But we rejoice that you are a jealous God. We rejoice that you will never stop loving us, that you can't help yourself, you'll always love us. Your love for us can never fail, and it is our only hope. So, Father, show us how much you love us, take us to you, imprison us with your love, so that we might be faithful. Open our eyes to the cross of your son Jesus so that we might see the lengths to which you would go to pursue your people. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.