



"And the people bowed & prayed
To the neon god they made."

~ Art Garfunkel

No Other Gods

"I the Lord thy God am a jealous God" (Exodus 20:5).

Doesn't that sound offensive? We know of jealousy as a "green-eyed monster" --as a vice. Whereas, God, we are sure, is perfectly good. Then, how can anyone imagine that jealousy could be found in God? When we do imagine God, we naturally ascribe to him only characteristics which we admire --jealousy is not something we admire.

However, God our creator has not left us to our imagination; he tells us about himself. God, whom we could never discover by any exercise of imagination, has revealed himself. God has talked. He has spoken through many human agents and messengers, through his creation, and through his Son.

Nor, has he left his message to be twisted by the distorting process of oral transmission. Instead, he has had it put on record in permanent written form. In the Bible, God's public record, we find God speaking repeatedly of his jealousy. Exodus 20:5, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God." In Exodus 34, the Lord is merciful, gracious, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy, forgiving iniquity; then, to sum it up, and round it out, and heap it up, the Lord declares that he is jealous.

The Bible says a good deal about God's jealousy. It is constantly presented as a motive to action in wrath and mercy. What is the nature of this Divine jealousy? How can jealousy be a virtue in God when it is a vice in people? God's perfection is a matter for praise; but, how can we praise God for being jealous?

The answer to these questions are found if we bear in mind two facts.

First, descriptions of God in the Bible are given in language taken from the life of man. The Bible is full of this. There is God's arm, hand, finger, foot, his hearing, his seeing, and smelling. There is his tenderness, anger, repentance, laughter, joy, and so forth. The reason God uses these terms to speak to us about himself is that, language taken from our own personal lives is the most accurate way to communicate thoughts about himself that there is.

We are created in the image of God and it is more illuminating, and less misleading for God to picture himself to us in human terms than it would be if he used any other. However, when God takes language from the life of man it is easy for us to grab the wrong end of the stick. When the language of human personal life is used of God, none of the human limitations are implied. Those elements in human

qualities which show the corrupting effect of sin have no counterpart with God.

For example, his wrath is not the ignoble outburst that human anger so often is --a sign of arrogance and weakness. Rather, it is holiness reacting to evil in a way that is morally right and wonderful. It is more --"O good! The villain will not win!" "The wrath of man does not work the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). However, the wrath of God is precisely his righteousness in judicial action. That is why it is so ugly when we see Christians taking over God's work in judgment. "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19). "I will repay" --not you. Today, we have Christians who know more about justice than God does.

In the same way, God's jealousy is not a compound of frustration, envy, and spite, as human jealousy so often is; it is instead, a praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely good.

Second, there are two sorts of jealousy among people, and only one of them is a vice. Vicious jealousy is an attitude that says, "I want what you've got, and I hate you because I haven't got it." "You did well --I did poorly, therefore, I hate you." Because of jealousy, even success or good fortune can bring a lot of grief. Jealousy is resentment springing from covetousness and expressing itself in envy, malice, meanness, and cynicism. It is fed by arrogance, the taproot of our fallen nature. "Wrath is cruel, anger is overwhelming; but who can stand before jealousy" (Proverbs 27:4)?

However, there is another sort of jealousy; it is zeal in our love. There is a jealousy that is a counterpart of love. Most people understand it; some people don't. I remember years ago in our Cathlamet, Washington parish, a couple came to me with a serious problem. They were thinking about getting a divorce. I asked them, what seemed to be the problem? She answered, "Well, I've been seeing Zeb Smith and he (her husband) is jealous about it." I replied, "I would think you would be disappointed if he weren't." She got the point. Spouses who feel no jealousy at the intrusion of a lover into their home would surely be lacking in commitment, devotion, and love; for the exclusiveness of marriage is the essence of marriage. We have tried to change that, but we've never been very successful at it. It doesn't even seem to work for those who subscribe to it. I think it is because issues of abandonment are involved; they are powerful issues for us all. --"He left me for her."

This sort of jealousy is a positive virtue. It shows a grasp of the true meaning of marriage with a proper zeal to keep it together and intact. I think these kinds of feelings are natural, normal, healthy, and inevitable. They only show that the spouse is valued as he or she should be. In this case, the couple did get back together; they have two married children and we enjoyed visiting with them when we visited Washington a few years ago.

Scripture consistently views God's jealousy as this kind; that is, as an aspect of his love for his people. A perfect love carries with it a demand for loyalty. The worship of idols, the compromise of morality, the twisting of truth, the denying of God is viewed in the Bible as unfaithfulness, and in the Old Testament God saw it as a kind of spiritual adultery, provoking him to jealousy. It was probed with this question: "Why are they doing what they are doing, when I love them so much? I've done so much for them."

The Lord very frequently addresses us in the character of a spouse, expecting that we will not prostitute our souls to Satan, evil, bad --to his enemy. He is offended when he sees us inclined to a rival.

In this case, the rival is not simply another suitor. It is:

Evil being allowed to push out good.
Wrong being allowed to push out right.
Injustice being allowed to push out justice.
Immorality being allowed to push aside morality.
Hate being permitted to displace love.
Meanness pushing out kindness.
Bitterness pushing out forgiveness.

~ You get the picture.

If he were not jealous for these reasons, he would not be God. For God to do right, he must seek his own glory. Nothing less could be defined as God. Likewise, for us to do right, we also, must seek God's glory.

What has motivated God in many of the events of history? Simply the fact that, "He is jealous for his Holy Name" (Ezekiel 29:25). God must protect His good name! He is the ruler of history, the guardian of righteousness, the savior of sinners, and God means his "Name" to be known, honored, and praised. "I Am the Lord: that is my name, and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images." God has a good name to protect. To compromise himself would be to allow wrong to prevail; God is not about to do that. If He did, we would be left with nothing.

What practical bearing does this have on those who profess to be God's people --the Christians?

The jealousy of God requires that we be jealous *for* God. Or zealous for God, if you would like to call it that way. The two words are very close in this case. The right response to God's jealousy over us is zeal for him. If his concern for us is great, then our concern for him must also be great.

The second command is "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." In the New Testament it is written as a positive rather than a negative, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength." The idea is clear; God's people should be positively and passionately devoted to his person, cause, and honor.

Whether he or she lives or dies, has health or sickness, is rich or poor, is thought wise or foolish, gets blame or praise, honor or shame, for all of this, the one thing with the Christian is whether he or she pleases God or not, and whether he or she advances God's good cause, kingdom and honor with his or her life.

The Christian will always find a place where his or her zeal can work for God. The Christian is to be "zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). Good works! Yes, good works! Doesn't that define our area of operations? We are to "overcome evil with good" –with good works, not with a club. You don't overcome evil with more evil. Where are Christians getting that? Thugs and mobsters don't do the Lord's work in some weird, twisted way. Don't "cheer for" and support the Christians who "tear down the law" and "break ranks with common ethics and decency" to accomplish their "superior good." –It's NOT good, and it's NOT superior! So then, Elijah was "Very jealous for the Lord God of Hosts." When facing the confinement of prison, Paul said, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I may finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). That was Paul's ministry? –to testify the gospel of the grace of God? He was going to stay with good and with God –no matter what. If you don't stay with good –don't claim to be "staying with God!"

What sort of connection do we have with God? When Christ spoke to the seven Churches he said to one of them, "I know your works, that you are not cold or hot" *and I wish you were one or the other.* There are some relationships that must be whole-hearted if they are to be anything at all. At least that's what Gloria thinks. They cannot be "so, so." It is what God expects. It is what God wants. I'm glad that he does; I'm glad that he feels that way about me.

I remember what one of our daughters said when she was dating, "**I'd rather be one in a million, not one of a million.**" That sentiment catches the meaning. That is the way God thinks about us, and that is the way we should think about God.