

Sermon 65, The Jealousy of God, Exodus 20:5-6

Proposition: Until you understand the passion of God and its generational outworking, you won't get why proper worship is such a big deal to Him.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the topic of today's sermon is very important for our understanding of our God. I certainly don't recall ever hearing a sermon on the jealousy of God (though one my childhood pastor preached on 1 Samuel 2's statement "Those who honor Me I will honor" stands out in my memory). Yet the English word "jealous" or "jealousy" appears 49 times in the NKJV, and the Hebrew root appears 87 times in the Hebrew Bible. The jealousy of God is a huge part of His character. It's something we need to know about, respect, and take into account in our worship. Indeed, brothers and sisters, I dare to proclaim to you tonight that until you understand the jealous, burning passion of God, you won't understand why proper worship is such a big deal to Him. But when you do get a glimpse of His jealous nature, you will understand why He demands that we worship Him only in the way He has authorized — and you too will care for the proper worship of God.

I. Jealous, Zealous, Impassioned: The Name of Yahweh, Ex. 34:14

The stated reason given for the second commandment is that Yahweh is a jealous God. And, as I just mentioned, this is far from the only time He identifies Himself as such. What does it mean for Him to be a jealous God? It means that He is chock-full of passionate zeal for His glory, His name, His worship, and His holiness. God is all about God. That, of course, is what holiness means: He exists for Himself. But to call Him jealous is to indicate that He cares as deeply as it is possible to care about His people, His purpose, and His glory.

The powerful passion of God is another way of describing His rushing, overpowering energy, His quality of being pure act with no passivity or potentiality latent within Him. Unlike

us, who could be a lot of things, God is actually everything He is and everything He could be. He has no potential, because He is fully actual and actualized.

Now, I am not brilliant enough to discourse at length on the rushing energy and passion of Yahweh God that is called holiness in some places, zeal in others, and jealousy in still others. Instead, the best thing I can do is to give you a sample of some of God's own statements in Scripture about His jealousy. The first of these comes later in the book of Exodus, shortly after the golden calf incident as Moses is trying to mediate and restore the relationship between the Almighty and the children of Israel. God consents to reestablish the covenant, and He does so as He passes before Moses and allows Moses to hide in the rock and see His back parts. One of the stipulations given on this august occasion is this: "for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God" (Exo 34:14 NKJ). Yahweh's name is I AM. Yahweh's name is also Jealous.

That is how closely God identifies with His zeal for Himself, His integrity, His holiness, and His worship. He says not that Jealous is His middle name (a figure of speech we often use to indicate that we closely identify with some idea or practice), but that Jealous is His name, period!

Brothers and sisters, that is quite a claim. That is a really good reason not to mess with graven images. God is passionate for Himself and for His relationship with His people. That's what jealousy means. Jealousy operates to police the boundaries of a relationship. A jealous wife makes sure that her husband isn't texting other women, meeting other women, or getting emotionally intimate with other women. A jealous God makes sure that His people are not getting worshipful in the presence of an icon, a crucifix, or any other sort of graven image.

But there is much more.

Deu 4:23-26 Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you. For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. When you beget children and grandchildren and have grown old in the land, and act corruptly and make a carved image in the form of anything, and do evil in the sight of the LORD your God to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed. (NKJ)

Eze 38:18-19 And it will come to pass at the same time, when Gog comes against the land of Israel," says the Lord GOD, "that My fury will show in My face. For in My jealousy and in the fire of My wrath I have spoken: `Surely in that day there shall be a great earthquake in the land of Israel.

Nah 1:2-3 God is jealous, and the LORD avenges; The LORD avenges and is furious. The LORD will take vengeance on His adversaries, And He reserves wrath for His enemies; The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, And will not at all acquit the wicked. The LORD has His way In the whirlwind and in the storm, And the clouds are the dust of His feet.

Zep 1:18 Neither their silver nor their gold shall be able to deliver them on the day of the wrath of the LORD. In the fire of his jealousy, all the earth shall be consumed; for a full and sudden end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth. (ESV)

Zep 3:8 Therefore wait for me," declares the LORD, "for the day when I rise up to seize the prey. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all my burning anger; for in the fire of my jealousy all the earth shall be consumed.

Notice if you would, brothers and sisters, how God associates His jealousy with fire — the consuming fire which is His being, the self-feeding fire which appeared in the bush to Moses, and the eschatological fire which will one day purify the earth and make it in the new earth where righteousness dwells.

That's why you should not have graven images. This burning jealousy, this burning zeal for the exclusivity of His holiness and His relationship with His people, is what motivates the Almighty to regulate our worship.

In other words, God cares. He cares a lot. He cares so deeply that the only thing that can properly be compared to His feelings about this issue is the primal and eschatological fire, the fire that burned in the bush and the fire that will one day burn up the works done on earth.

II. Generational: The Jealous Practice of Yahweh, v. 5

But the reality of God's jealousy doesn't stop there. It merely begins there. His jealousy, being one with His holiness, one with the Secret Fire of His being and His purity, is not limited in its effects to merely the one who violated it. Just as a cuckolded man can, in the fire of his jealousy, murder both his unfaithful wife and her paramour, so Yahweh in the fire of His jealousy speaks generationally. God's consuming jealousy is not something that can just come to end with the death of the one who triggered it. His jealousy burns on — and, as His statement in the second commandment makes clear, this long-duration burning is both positive and negative.

A. Negatively

We think of jealousy primarily in its negative sense: a jealous husband shows his jealousy primarily when he suspects his wife of cheating on him. And that negative sense is certainly here in the text, in spades. The negative side of the consuming fire of God's jealousy will burn for three to four generations.

1. False Worship Is Hatred of God

Again, the primary arena where God's jealousy is manifest is the arena of worship. God specifically labels false worship here as hatred of Himself. To worship wrongly is to hate God. To bow before a graven image, an icon, a crucifix — this is not a way of showing love to God, or of looking through a window into heaven's worship. This is, according to God's own testimony, an act of hatred directed against Himself.

If I say to my wife, "Honey, it doesn't matter where I get my appetite so long as I eat at home," she's rightly going to be jealous. If I tell her that I spotted an extremely hot babe working out at my gym, and then proceed to enumerate a list of ways in which this bombshell turned me on, should I expect my wife to say "How wonderful! Guess we're going to have a hot time in the

bedroom tonight!” Of course not. Would it make things better if I said, “But honey, I just love femininity. As a matter of fact, I love your femininity so much that when I see versions of it elsewhere they turn me on”?

No, that wouldn’t help. That would only make it all worse. And if you say to God “I love your deity, and when I see its icon I get all revved up for worship,” that makes Him even more angry. In His mind — His definitive, by-definition-correct evaluation of the situation, you are showing how much you hate Him when you engage in your consumer worship, your aesthetic worship, your entertainment-driven worship.

Brothers and sisters, even if you disagree politically with the governor of our state, would you ever deliberately do something that signaled to him that you personally and cordially hate him?

Would you want to signal to the principal of your child’s school that you hate her? Or basically, to anyone in a position of power who has some influence over the course of your life? What part of saying “I hate you” to such a person is a good idea? No part of it is a good idea. But the jealousy of God is such that when He sees you committing false worship, He regards you as saying to His face “I hate you, God.”

2. False Worship Visited on 3-4 Generations

And the consequences of that sort of hatred will reverberate in your family for 3-4 generations. Does this mean that God is unjust, punishing people for something they didn’t do? Not at all. Rather, this is a statement about the connectedness of generations. If your parents are idol-worshippers, it doesn’t take a genius to say that you are likely going to be an idol-worshiper. We understand that these things run in families. If your father is a colonel in the Air Force, you are much more likely to serve in the military than if your father is a farmer in Nebraska or a hedge fund manager in New York. If your parents are methheads, you are a lot more likely to be a methhead too — assuming you live long enough to get there. And so on. Parents, if you sin then your children are likely to imitate you in that sin. I cannot tell you how many irregular attenders of church have told me, “Yes, my parents took us church sometimes, and we stayed home sometimes.”

Ultimately, this relates back to the reality that families are unified, in solidarity with each other, and that what affects one member affects the whole family. The same is true of the human race, which is a giant family with one set of first parents. Because Adam sinned, we all sin and we all suffer every day. God has visited the iniquity of that father on his children to the thousandth generation and more.

So brothers and sisters, if you want to trigger God’s flamethrower, if you want to bring fire on yourself and your children, indulge in false worship. Let images carry you into what you imagine to be the presence of God. But know that the better way is to flee such youthful lusts. Know instead that God’s jealousy has a positive side too, announced here as the showing of *hesed*, covenant love, for a thousand generations.

B. Positively

Yes, that's right: Though we think of human jealousy as being active only when someone is breaching the relationship, God's jealousy is perfectly balanced. It is as positive as it is negative; it motivates Him to invest in, maintain, and bless the relationship that He has with His people over the long haul.

You probably don't think of jealousy as the thing that keeps you faithful to your wife, faithful to invest in your marriage, and faithful to keep things going well on the home front. But God's jealousy, His burning zeal, His holiness, motivates Him to do all those positive things that keep His relationship with His people in good shape.

1. Steadfast Love for a Thousand Generations

That's why He shows steadfast love to thousands of people, and to thousands of generations. His threats are directed against parents and their offspring; His promises are directed to parents and their offspring too.

What is God's steadfast love? It is that thing which keeps Him delighting in His children. It is His covenant faithfulness, His commitment, His steadfast and unflinching unconditional love. Brothers and sisters, this too is the character of God. Don't focus on the negative to the exclusion of the positive here. Do you see how the second commandment's presentation of God is perfectly balanced? In other words, it's not just threats — God saying "Worship me right or else." It's promises too — God saying "Here's why you should worship me right. You should worship me right because I will never stop loving you and your descendants for thousands of generations." Wow.

We are so used to the idea of abusive husbands who mistake selfishness for commitment and stalking for love that we have a hard time getting our minds around how powerful and providing God's steadfast love actually is. It was through love that He created the world. He doesn't pull all things into Himself, eating them alive like Satan. Rather, everything that is came forth from His steadfast love. His commitment is not abusive or stalker-like; His commitment is perfectly loving, caring, creating, and providing.

That's why you should worship Him rightly.

2. True Worship Is Love of God

And you see, to worship rightly is to love your God. It's not just that He loves you; He wants you to love Him back. Love is an action; you perform love, you do love, by worshiping Him as He commands. Why? Because He loves you. The steadfast love comes to thousands — to those who love Him. What sort of love is envisioned here? The love of true worship. He doesn't mean "Thousands, those who feel warm fuzzies about me," but "thousands, those who perform acts of love toward me."

3. True Worship Is Obedience to God's Commandments

Lest you miss the point, God puts "and keep my commandments" in parallel with "love me." False worship is hatred of God. True worship keeps His commands and thus demonstrates love to Him.

Again, this has all gotten so twisted up in abusive relationships and sinful patterns that we hardly know how to hear positively about the jealousy that creates and keeps an exclusive relationship. But that jealousy is real, it is mighty, and it is wonderful. You don't have to wonder whether God will leave you; He promises to show steadfast love to you and your seed for a thousand generations.

So worship God for His jealousy. He wants an exclusive, committed relationship. He doesn't just fuss when you attempt to transgress the boundaries of the relationship; He also pours into the relationship within those boundaries, giving you His steadfast love and pouring it out on your children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren for generation after generation.

III. Application: How to be a Family Blessed by Yahweh

So brothers and sisters, I hope this little tour has helped you to understand the character of your God. Do you want to know His steadfast love for multiple generations of your family? There are two simple applications of this truth that God's name is Jealous and that His character is jealous too.

A. Worship God Rightly

So I plead with you: Worship God rightly! Worship Him in Spirit and Truth, with word and sacrament and congregational singing. Don't worship in the entertainment or consumer ways.

B. Teach Your Children to Worship God Rightly

And yes, teach your children to worship God rightly too. Don't use graven images or pictures of Jesus to teach them about Him; teach them to worship in Spirit and Truth, with word and song and sacrament.

Brothers and sisters, we want to know God's steadfast love from generation to generation. Let's pursue it by loving Him and keeping His commandments, especially His command to worship Him in the way that He desires.

After all, that's what Jesus did. That's how God's beloved Son does it. He worships rightly; He loves His Father; He keeps His Father's commands. And in Him, we can do so too. We are His children, children of God. Let's worship our Father as He commands, as He deserves, and as He loves to be honored. Amen.