

The Jealous God

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Preacher: Andrew Reid

[0:00] There are some here who may like a full text of the sermon. If so, Mark is walking around and he can supply one. At times you'll find tonight that I'm working on a slightly different translation.

I'm sorry about that, but I think you'll be right if you follow in the translations that are in the pews in front of you. Okay, I want you to imagine the context. You love something very much.

In fact, you love it too much. You pursue it with zeal. In fact, you desire it and you desire to possess it completely.

And then that object of your desire just slips away from you. It slips out of your hands and it passes into the hands of another. And you begin to experience pangs of jealousy.

You begin to have those gnawing pangs inside of you that eat away at you. Strange feelings of zeal and of love emerge. Your love begins to turn into another emotion.

[1:09] Hatred. Once you are happy. Once you are filled with exquisite delight at the sight or the presence of the thing, the one or the thing that you loved. Not anymore.

Now you're closed. Inner rage has replaced happiness. You are now intensely raging, intensely angry at the sight of the thing that you love.

William Shakespeare wrote a play called Othello. And that play spends a large amount of time focused on the theme of jealousy. Othello fears that he is losing his love called Desdemona.

And at one point he puts it this way. I'd rather be a toad and live in the vapour of a dungeon than to keep a corner in the thing that I love for others' use.

Do you hear it? I'll read it again. It's Shakespeare so you've got to just stick there till the end. Okay. I had rather be a toad and live in the vapour of a dungeon than keep a corner of the thing that I love for other uses, for other person's uses.

[2:23] Jealousy is a really savage master. See, jealousy decimates friendships, dissolves romance, destroys marriage, nullifies unity in a team, ruins churches, separates preachers, fosters competition, brings bitterness.

It questions other people's motives. It deplores the success of others. It's severe. It's narrow. It's suspicious. It's negative. It is awful. And yet in Exodus chapter 20 verse 5, God says, For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.

What does that mean? We have, we have, our associations of jealousy are very negative, aren't they? How can God use the term positively?

What does God mean when he says he's a jealous God? Now let's look at our passage from Exodus 20 and see what we can make of it. And you'll see from today's outline, if you've got the outline in front of you, that I intend to work my way step by step through the main statements of the second commandment.

And as we come to each statement, we're going to apply it to ourselves. Let's have a look and see what God has to say to us today from this. The first statement occurs in verse 4, you shall make, you shall not make for yourself an idol.

[3 : 33] That statement explained, is explained in my version by two other statements that follow. You shall not bow down to or worship or serve. Now it's important to understand what's being said in this commandment.

You see, there are two possibilities, I think. God could be following up the first commandment. In his first commandment, he says, you shall have no other gods but me. And perhaps he's saying something more of that here.

That is, Israel should not worship other gods. Or it could mean, you should not make an image of another god and worship it.

Do you understand the difference? It could be, you should not worship other gods. Or it could be, you should not make the image of another god and then worship that image. So, stress could be on the idea of an image or the idea of another god.

God could be saying that his people must not make a physical representation of him. And I think that makes a lot of sense. You see, from the very first page of the Bible, God is clear that he is separate from his creation.

[4 : 39] He's wholly separate from his creation. He's like nothing the human mind can conceive. He's nothing like human imagined can picture or depict.

Therefore, any material representation of God is prohibited. And I think that's what is meant by this commandment. I think God is saying that his people cannot make an image of him.

And I can understand why. So, think about it for a moment. Then, whenever you make an image of something, it is not long before the image becomes the reality.

Okay, it's not long before you capture the person in the image. It's not long before you domesticate and tame the thing represented by the image. And it's not long before the image itself becomes the focus of your reverence and the object of your worship.

And the God of the Old Testament is very clear. He cannot be domesticated, tied down in any way. And he's not to be tied down in an image. That is, he can't be tamed.

[5 : 46] He's a free God and a sovereign God who can do what he likes and where he likes. And the only place God chooses to confine himself is in his word. That's what is meant by Deuteronomy.

If you've got your Bibles there, flip through to Deuteronomy chapter 4, verses 12, 15 to 19. So, look at Deuteronomy.

Let's flip over a few verses from Exodus, chapters, books. Deuteronomy chapter 4, verse 12.

Moses says, Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but you saw no form. There was only a voice. And let me tell you, if you were to go into the innermost place of the ancient Israelite temple or tabernacle, do you know what you'd find?

You'd find a box. And if you lifted the lid on the box, do you know what you'd find inside? A set of words. Ten commandments. You see, God, as it were, confines himself in his word.

[6 : 54] And that's the cornerstone of biblical faith. You see, God does not reveal himself in images. He reveals himself in word. If God allows himself to be captured, it is in his word.

It's in his word that he reveals who he is and what he is like. So if you want a picture of what God is like, then you listen to his word. And as the words build up, they will build a picture of him.

So as a way of thinking about what this means to us, I want to reflect on some incidents that hit the front page of a number of newspapers in Australia a number of years ago. What has happened in the Anglican diocese in Sydney is that they have just lost, that is, he's moved on, he's retired, their previous archbishop.

His name is Peter Jensen. I remember back to when he was first elected. Now, soon after his election, he made some very bold statements. He had the temerity to imply that the prime minister of Australia at that time might have been out of step with God on a number of issues facing Australians.

And he implied that God's will could be known on these matters in the Bible. And I watched television that night and I was intrigued by the response.

[8 :10] Politician after politician was interviewed and every one of them from a very different political perspective. And they were people who I could not imagine would readily agree on anything at all.

But they did agree on something. They were unanimous that no one could presume to speak for God, including an archbishop. They were unanimous that God's will could not easily be known.

You see, friends, it is very easy to make an idol. And let me tell you, you don't need just a sort of carving in the corner of your room. You don't need that.

If you for behind every carving in the corner of a room is a person with an imagination who carved it, isn't there? OK, and a person who imagines that God is like this.

And so they carve something in that shape. You can tell an idolater by the way that they talk. They will say such things like, well, I believe that God is like this.

[9 :15] I've got no evidence for it or whatever, but I believe God is like this. Or even even neater is. I like to think of God like that. Or I don't believe God could be like this.

You see, the God of the Old Testament warns us against such idolatry. That is, he's not the God we imagine. He is a God who reveals himself. And who knows, who has explained what he is like in his word.

He is a God. He has told us in his word who he is and what he is like. It's known. It's out there in the public domain. You can go and pick up a Bible, listen to his or hear his word. And there it will be.

This is what God is like. He is a God who is explained. It's not that we think of him in our personal or collective imagination.

He's known in his revealed word. Peter Jensen was right. You see, we cannot be soft on idols. God and his will can be known and it can be spoken about.

[10 :18] And it's always confronting because what it's saying is God can't be tamed. I can't shape God in my own image, as it were, in the way that I like to think of him. Because if he reveals himself through his word, he shapes himself.

Now, let me turn to the next statement. Verse 5, it says, for I am a jealous God. Now, the Hebrew word that's used for jealousy here is something like to become intensely red, you know, that sort of thing.

And that's because the person who's jealous obviously displays the emotions that can feel the color of their face, right? When you're really jealous. We have a different color for it, don't we? Green.

Right. But this one's a very different word. It's a very strong, you know, word. It's red. The word's very strong. The form of the word that is used here is unique. It's a form never used in the Bible in reference to human beings.

It's only used in reference to God. In other words, when the writers of the Bible use this term, they want us to understand that the jealousy we're talking about here is very different to our jealousy.

[11 :23] Let me see if I can explain it. Underneath the word jealousy, there sits the idea of a marriage bond. God is in a covenant relationship with his people, which is not unlike a marriage bond.

And God demands the same sort of exclusive loyalty that a husband or a wife might demand of their spouse. That is, God's very deeply involved in a relationship with his people.

And unlike human jealousy, which is tinged with envy, God is a God who's deeply in love with his people and filled with passion for relationship with them. And he wants their exclusive relationship with him.

He will not allow any other suitors, any other husbands. Now, what does that mean for us? Well, come with me into the New Testament. We'll see what one writer has to say on the topic.

Come with me to James 4, which was our other Bible reading. Let's have a look at it together. So James chapter 4. And I'm going to read from verses 4 through to 6 of James 4.

[12:32] It reads like this. You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

Or do you think that the scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit that he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives more grace.

That is why scripture says God opposes the proud, but shows favor to the humble. So the people that James is writing to are jealous or envious of what other people have.

And can you hear what James is saying to them in chapter 4 verses 4 to 6? He's saying that when they seek to make a friendship with the world, they are committing a sort of spiritual adultery.

And I think James is echoing what God says in Exodus. God will have no rivals. The people's jealousy, their selfish ambition, their earthly attitudes demonstrates where their allegiance lies.

[13:37] They are allied to the world more than they are allied to God. And James then pushes it home in verse 5. He says, and the Greek's notoriously difficult to translate, but the thrust of it is clear.

He's saying God created us for him. He intensely desires friendship with us. He desires that our allegiance is toward him and him alone.

And he will intensely oppose anything or anyone who draws us away from him. And he intensely reacts when we seek to supplant him with anything or anyone else.

This passage is a great example of how to apply the second commandment. You see, in our world, there are many things that call for our allegiance, aren't there? There are many idols we make.

You can tell an idol by the way that we fight and quarrel amongst ourselves or within ourselves. Our desires fight their way to the surface of our existence and demonstrate where our allegiances lie.

[14:43] Now, it's very easy to tell with children. Okay? You put any children in a... You know, if I put my grandchildren for the first year of, you know, from the time they were three or four into a preschool or whatever, children are great at expressing jealousy.

Because one child will see what another child has and they'll long intensely for it. And before long, they'll be pushing and shoving and knocking and manipulating until you get it, you see.

And so it's possible to become jealous that someone else's being has something that you have. It's possible to envy the fact that someone else is more gifted than you are.

And such things demonstrate our huge propensity for sin. Friends, let me tell you, there's a lovely book that's been written. Well, it's not so lovely because it really hits me.

But it is called Preacher, Keep Yourself from Idols. It's a lovely title, isn't it? Because I think preachers can be amongst some of the best idolaters.

[15:54] Because they look at what gifts other people have. They want to mimic them. They want to have them. And they begin to... That longs to be... That becomes the thing that dominates their lives.

You see, there's a huge propensity in us for sin. And we demonstrate that our friendship is drifting away from friendship with God to friendship with the world.

It's very easy to become adulterers and enemies of God. And God's advice is clear. Be warned. God is a jealous God. And to hate Him is to incur His anger.

So James then says, Therefore return to Him. Look at verse 7 in James 4. Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil. He'll flee from you. Come near to God. He'll come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners.

Purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning. Your joy to gloom. Humble yourself before God the Lord. And He will lift you up.

[16:51] In other words, don't go yearning after other things. Draw near to God. That's where life and fullness is found. Don't make idols. Now, let's turn to the last two statements in the passage.

Look at the second half of verse 5. We've been told God is a jealous God. His jealousy rises to the surface in two ways. On the one hand, God's jealousy can be seen, strangely, in the punishment of those who forsake Him.

You see, on the one hand, that jealousy is seen in His massive love toward those who love Him. But it can be seen in His punishment of those who forsake Him. Let's have a look at the issue of punishment first.

We're told in these verses that God's jealousy results in Him punishing sin to the second and third generation of those who reject Him. Now, what's important to remember here is that the people we're talking about are not just anyone.

They're God's covenant people. They're in relationship with Him. They're a community of people that have said they belong to Him. What's being said here is that the conduct of individuals affect the life of the community.

[18:02] And the Bible's full of examples of this. So, you know, one person's sin can flow through a community. For example, in Genesis, we find that Isaac and his wife Rebecca play favourites with their children, Jacob and Esau.

And that favouritism of those within that family sours the family life in succeeding generations. You read it? It just flows all the way through into generation after generation.

We hear that Jacob is a deceiver. His actions as a deceiver sour his family life in the succeeding generation. These people act in ungodly and similar ways. Their sinfulness has a detrimental effect on the subsequent life of their communities.

And God's punishment on them in some way means carries down to subsequent generations. It's a sobering truth, isn't it? And we have a graphic example of this principle in our corporate life in Australia.

You see, let me explain now. A previous generation of ours in Australia, and we could easily have been among them, decided that we would take Aboriginal children away from their parents.

[19:09] And there may have been very good reasons for making that decision at the time or whatever, but that's what they decided to do. That is to forcibly assimilate Aboriginal children into white culture.

Now that act has come back to haunt us, hasn't it? It has sown very deep rifts within Australian society. Our relationship with those Aboriginal people is strained by our past actions.

Even an apology a couple of years ago, a few years ago, hasn't really dealt with it adequately. It has helped it.

But our whole society is somewhat affected by this. And we see examples in our personal lives, don't we? Actions taken by our parents or people that have been responsible for us have deeply affected us, haven't they?

Think of a child whose parents broke up when they were young. That child has now become an adult and lives with the impact of that act. Think of the child that's been sexually abused while they are a child.

[20 : 14] That often perpetuates for generations. You see, our sin is never committed in a vacuum, is it? Sin is always committed in the context of other people. Sin always affects other people.

Sin always affects other people. However, I shouldn't leave this passage without giving the other side of the story. You see, the Old Testament people heard these words and they knew that they were true.

And they began to think that their own actions were irrelevant. They began to think that their situation had come about because of something their ancestors had done and that there was nothing they could do about it.

They began to think that God was punishing them and there was nothing they could do about it because of something their parents had done. And they even had a little proverb that's reiterated in a couple of places in the Old Testament.

Prophets of Jeremiah and Ezekiel record this proverb for us and it goes like this. See if you can envisage it. The parents have eaten sour grapes, okay?

[21 : 17] And the children's teeth are set on edge. Does that make sense? So what they're saying is mum and dad, way back, they had these foul tasting grapes.

They ate them and we've got the taste in our mouth. In other words, they sinned. We're reaping the consequences. We're getting the result of it. Our parents sinned.

We're getting the consequences. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel are called upon by God to respond. And you can, if you want to write down now where that response is, it's in Ezekiel 18, 1 to 4 and Ezekiel 18 verse 20.

I'm going to read it to you. I just want you to listen to it. This is what Ezekiel is told. The word of the Lord came to me. What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel?

The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge. As shortly as I live, declares the sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel.

[22 : 21] Can you see the point that's being made?

While it's true that we are undoubtedly affected by the sins of our forefathers, we are also responsible for our own existence. I wonder if I can give you a personal example.

When I was going out with my wife, Heather, that is before we were married, my parents broke up. They divorced. They were Christian people.

And I thought I was therefore bound to divorce as well. My relationship with Heather was bound to break up as well. And I was really scared about it. I thought this would flow down.

And I had this wise Christian man who said, who used some verses like this from the Bible, You see, we make our own choices.

[23 : 40] And so to some extent, our existence now is our own responsibility. We can't blame our parents. Can't blame Adam and Eve. We have made our own choices. We can choose to follow in the steps of our forebears or we can choose to make another decision.

And it's a sobering truth. You see, an example would be, I am very like my father. There are things my father did that I don't think were right. I learned from him.

His decisions have shaped me. However, I don't have to repeat his mistakes. I'm my own person able to make my own choices. And just so that I don't blame it all on my father, perhaps I might give the alternate side as well.

I could say to my sons, I did many things wrong when you were growing up. There are things that I did that I should not have done.

I don't want you to learn from me. You're not bound to repeat the mistakes that I made. You need to make your own choices. But let's have a look now at verse 6. We've been told God's a jealous God.

[24 : 42] His jealousy rises to the surface in two ways. On the one hand, he can punish those who forsake him. But verse 6 says that his jealousy can be seen in the massive love he has toward those who love him.

And there are two things to concentrate on in these verses. First, notice the comparison between God's punishment and God's love. How many generations does his punishment affect?

Have a look at it. Two or three. However, his love affects thousands of generations. And this will be picked up later on in Exodus as well.

You see, God's disposition is therefore where? It is not towards judgment, but toward mercy. That's what God longs to do.

In the Old Testament, God's judgment is sometimes called his alien or strange work. That is, it's not his first choice. Mercy and love are his first choice. Second, we need to notice the actual word used here for God's action.

[25 : 42] In our translation, or in the one I was using, the word is love. The Hebrew word means his unobligated, surprising, unprecedented, overflowing, generous, kindness, love and grace.

It's something that you don't deserve. Something that, not something that you merit. It's overflowing and generous. It's God as he seeks to be himself. Now, I want you to have a look now at Romans chapter 5.

So, in your Bibles, flip through to the New Testament, to Romans 5, and look at Romans 5, 1-8. Sorry, there's lots of Bible flipping tonight, but it will do you no harm.

Romans 5, 1-8. So, let me read it to you. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, perseverance, character, character, hope.

[26 : 51] Hope doesn't put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this, that while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

Can you hear what the verses are saying? We were God's enemies. We had chosen to be God's enemies. We had done nothing to earn God's mercy.

But God acted in surprising, unobligated, overflowing love and grace by sending his Son into the world to die in our place. God demonstrates his love in this, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Now, the few verses from the book of Exodus that we've looked at have captured great truths about the nature of God, haven't they? What do we learn from verses 4 to 6 in Exodus chapter 20?

[27:56] First of all, God's a God who loves relationships. He's holy. He's just. He's faithful. And he's overflowing with mercy and love.

So he loves relationships. He's holy. He's just. He's faithful. He's overflowing in mercy and love. And all of those great truths find their expression where?

In Jesus. In his life, death, resurrection and ascension, we see the same God as we see here in Exodus. A God who is worthy of worship.

And so, if that's the case, we ought to approach him in an appropriate way. How do you approach a God who's like this? With fear. With care. With awe.

But with great gladness. And with huge joy and deep thankfulness. You see, our God, revealed in Jesus Christ, is worthy of worship. And if that's the case, don't go substituting him for someone or something else far less.

[29:08] See, let's keep ourselves from idols. The New Testament says it a number of times. Keep yourself from idols. From gods that are not serious about themselves. From gods that are not exclusive.

You see, a real God thinks, understands that he alone is worthy of worship. So, he will naturally be exclusive. We want a God who is serious about himself.

That is exclusive. That is just. That is overflowing in mercy and kindness. And the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is like that. He alone is worthy of worship.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you that you alone are worthy of worship. For you, Father, love relationships.

You are holy. You are just. You are faithful. You are overflowing with mercy and love. And we know this because of what we've seen you do in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[30:12] So, Father, please help us to keep ourselves from idols. Please help us not to go running after gods that are not these things.

That are not like you. That are not like your Son. For we know you alone are worthy of worship. And your Son alone is worthy of worship.

Please help us to worship him and not desert him. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.