

A Jealous God

In the name of our jealous God, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: *Jealous*. A lot of people are taken aback that the Lord describes himself with that word. We don't normally think of jealousy as a virtue. Usually, we think of it as sin. That's because when we use the word "jealous", most often we mean "envious" or even "covetous" – which are indeed sinful concepts. We say someone is jealous, for example, when they feel badly toward someone else because that person got the promotion they'd hoped for, or when they feel resentful because the neighbors have a nicer house or a newer car. We use "jealous" to describe the hard feelings that lie behind a lot of sibling rivalry. If one child gets from a parent what seems to be preferential treatment, or apparently greater affection, or even what is perceived to be less severe punishment (than is so *richly* deserved), and it causes the other children to be spiteful, we say that they are *jealous* of their brother or sister. In these examples, the forms of jealousy described are wrong. What makes them wrong is the wicked self-interest of the ones who are jealous. They're looking out for number one, and they want what somebody else got.

But some forms of jealousy are entirely appropriate. An author who defends himself from plagiarism, or a musical artist who fights to prevent her songs from being copied by internet pirates are said to be jealous of their work. There the word "jealous" means that they are *possessively watchful* of what properly belongs to them. They don't want what they worked so hard to achieve to be stolen by someone else. There's nothing wrong with that. Likewise, we use the word "jealous" to describe certain feelings that husbands and wives have with respect to each other. Gentlemen, if you feel like punching the guy who is making a pass at your wife; or ladies, if you feel like tearing the hair out of some woman who is trying to seduce your husband, you are experiencing feelings of jealousy. And while I'm not recommending that you act on your *violent* impulses, the feelings of jealousy themselves *should* be there. It's right for you to be protective of what has been promised to you alone and that cannot properly be shared with anyone else. You should be intolerant of infidelity in your spouse. This is *proper* jealousy. And yes, it can be wrong if carried to unreasonable excesses; but within the right parameters, you are supposed to be jealous of some things.

With this in mind, we can better appreciate what the Lord means when he says that he is a jealous God. But I want to be careful not to draw a direct correlation between God's jealousy and even the right kinds of human jealousy, because there's still a big difference. You see, if we were to look at what's behind even the noblest form of human jealousy, we'd still detect a certain amount of self-centeredness. The writer and musical artist I mentioned were jealous of their work to protect their own interests. And I'm not saying that it's evil or anything, but it is self-shielding. They are ultimately thinking of themselves – looking out for number one. Even a spouse who is properly jealous is displaying a certain element of trying to protect himself or herself from getting hurt by alienation of affection or worse. That person is thinking, "I'm jealous of *you* for my *own* sake."

It's there that God's jealousy is different. That's because *God is love*. And love gives. It sacrifices. It always thinks of others – places them first – and never, ever, operates in its own selfish interest. Love is the driving force behind God's jealousy. Therefore it is clear that when God says that he is jealous, it is not for his benefit, but for the benefit of others – namely, us. Yes, God is jealous: he is possessively watchful of what properly belongs to him, and he is protective of it; and he is intolerant of infidelity or disloyalty, and he will not allow himself to be

supplanted in our hearts for our trust or affection. But he operates those ways, *jealously*, for the benefit of you and me.

Today's three Scripture readings go a long way to show us precisely how the Lord's jealousy manifests itself and how it he uses it to serve us, his people. So it will be good for us to take the opportunity to spend a few moments this morning reflecting on this often overlooked attribute of God.

In the reading from Exodus, the Lord first describes himself as a jealous God. He's saying that he will tolerate no competitors for his Godhead. He's the only God there is, and he will not put up with any imposters or pretenders—and certainly not in the form any silly idols shaped by the hands of men of lifeless materials to look like various creatures that he himself created. You can almost feel his frustration with those who do that sort of thing. I mean, how dumb is that? To worship as *your god* an object *you* made instead of the One who made you and the object you're worshipping? *Hello?* But of course, we have our own idols, don't we? Luther said your god is whatever it is you look to for help in times of trouble, or what you think will bring you ultimate happiness and fulfillment. So we make our gods of money and possessions, of science, technology, and medicine, and of various forms of pleasure and entertainment – of created things rather than the Creator. It's just plain dumb to worship these things like we do. God wants us to worship him alone. ... But maybe you're thinking, "Well, see: the Lord *is* operating in his own self-interest after all. He wants all the worship and glory for himself. Surely that's a selfish motive behind his jealousy."

But is it? Look again at what precedes the part where he describes himself as jealous. By way of introduction he says, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery." And *then* he says, "You shall have no other gods before me." First he says, "I'm the God who saves and delivers you"; then he says, "You are to recognize that fact." Or to say it another way, "If you choose to recognize as your god anything other than Me, you are directing your worship to something that cannot save you or bring you lasting fulfillment." God is jealous of his Godhead not because he's worried about being supplanted as God (after all, he is always going to be the only one qualified for the job); but he's jealous of it for *our* sake, because when we allow him to be supplanted in our hearts by anything else, we lose our close connection to him and the salvation he gives. God wants to be recognized as God not because he needs our worship and praise or because he feels bad when he doesn't get it; but rather because *we need to worship him* in order to keep us focused on the true source of our lives and everything about them. God is jealous of his position for our benefit.

Then, if we just follow down the commandments, we see that the Lord is jealous of his name: he doesn't want it to be used vainly. Again, he's interested in protecting his name for our good. Here the issue is largely one of truthfulness and integrity. It's not that he's worried about having a bad name for his own sake, but rather that he knows we need a God who is absolutely trustworthy – whose name is the equivalent of truth. When someone takes an oath in the Lord's name frivolously or dishonestly, he creates the impression that the Lord can't be trusted. The worst form of taking God's name in vain is to teach false doctrine: to say, "God says thus and so", when God says no such thing; or conversely, to say, "God never said that", when indeed he did. By such misuses of God's name people are thrown into confusion and souls are lost to hell. So we see it's for our good that God is jealous of his name.

In the third commandment we see that God is jealous of his Sabbath day. And I think this is perhaps the least understood of all God's commands. A lot of people think that the Lord sits on high keeping score of who goes to church on Sunday, and that he gets all offended when

finds a Sabbath violator. “Oh, Bob, that’s two Sundays in a row you’ve missed. Now you’re really making me angry.” But that’s exactly the wrong way to look at it. God is jealous of his Sabbath for our benefit, and you can see it by just looking at the command. God says, “I want you to take a day off and rest. Take a break from all your work. Relax.” How anyone can read that God wants to give us a one-day vacation every week and think that he intends it as a terrible burden is beyond me.

But here the Lord explains, “I created everything in six days, and then I took a day off.” And so we see that the pattern of “work six - rest one” is meant to be a constant reminder and reinforcement to us that the Lord is our Creator, and that everything we are and have is only because of his work and his goodness to us. We are the result of *his work*. So *you rest* and remember that. Elsewhere in Scripture, God explains to his people, “When you were slaves, you never got a day of rest. So rest on the Sabbath to remember how I saved you – how with my mighty outstretched arm I brought you up out of slavery.” The Sabbath was to be a reminder of God’s work of deliverance. And so it is for us. We come here to rest on the Sabbath by remembering and hearing again that our salvation is not something we do by our work; but rather it’s something that has been done for us by God – our God who with outstretched arms worked so hard to save us from sin and death. So yes, he’s jealous of the Sabbath – but it’s for our good that he is.

Now, those of you who are also jealous about guarding your precious Sabbath day time and who are thinking, “Good grief, we’ve been listening for quite some time and we’ve still got seven commandments to go”, will be happy to know that even though I could, I don’t plan to show how God’s jealousy for our benefit is revealed in each one of his laws. Instead, I’d like to skip over to the Gospel reading where the Lord shows that he is jealous of other things; namely, the way his house is used.

We hear how Jesus comes into the holy temple in Jerusalem to find that it’s become a market of trade and merchandise – and how that infuriates him. We are rather surprised to see that the normally gentle and mild mannered Jesus virtually explodes in righteous anger. He makes a whip and drives businessmen and buyers out of the sacred precincts with stinging blows, and then he backtracks to upset their tables. This is sacred space with a sacred purpose, and Jesus jealously defends it from encroachment by those who would misappropriate it for other uses. Specifically, we know that the marketing took place on what was designated the “court of the Gentiles”: the place where any person could come to hear God’s Word and offer him their prayers, praise, and worship. But such people (and that would include Gentiles like you and me) had been crowded out. So, again, I want you to see that Jesus is jealous of the temple grounds not so much because he’s worried about his Father being offended by its misuse; but because it had become an obstacle to reaching people with the Lord’s saving truth. It was interfering with their communion with him.

The same is true today: Jesus is jealous of the way his church is used. There are those who would love to make it a business, or a country club, or a platform for addressing social issues, politics, and who knows what else. There’s nothing wrong with any of those activities – but they don’t belong in the church because they crowd out and obscure its divinely intended purpose, which is proclamation of God’s Word by which the Lord reaches people with the gifts of his salvation and makes them his own children. It’s for us that Jesus is jealous of his church.

And finally, in today’s Epistle reading, we hear how the Lord is jealous of the *message* of his church. Paul writes, “Jews want miraculous signs, Greeks want wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified – a scandal to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks.” Look: no one can perform

signs and wonders like the Lord, and no one can outdo him in the wisdom department; but no one ever came to saving faith in the Gospel by seeing a miracle or by being dazzled with wisdom. They came to faith by being convicted in their hearts of their sin by the Holy Spirit and then by hearing the proclaimed truth that Jesus died for the sins of the world and rose from the dead. Paul makes it clear: it's not what people want. But it is what people need. So the Lord is jealous of his church's message because he wants to give us what he knows we need.

And what we will always need in this life is to hear how our jealous God gave up for us what we would have expected him to jealousy guard most of all: his one and only Son. That truth is the final proof of God's great love, and the indisputable guarantee that the Lord's jealousy always serves us rather than himself. So, in all these things, we've seen how the Lord is jealous for our good – and the reason he is jealous for us is that he is jealous of us. So jealous, in fact, that he has promised to keep us in this saving faith, possessively guarding us, so that no one will ever snatch us out of his mighty hands. Of this we can be absolutely certain. May we then jealously guard this truth so that the God we worship, the *jealous* God, will always be *our* God; and that to him we may give all thanks, honor, and praise now and forever, in Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!