

The Covenant Pulpit



PURSUING THE HEART OF GOD

"David, a man after God's Heart"

"THE REPENTANT HEART"

2 Samuel 11&12

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The decision by the high court stunned a nation.

The case had wormed its way through the legal system in Massachusetts before going all the way to the Supreme Court. Along the way, it captivated America and garnered headlines around the world.

While walking on a boat dock in the summer of 1928, a man tripped over a rope and fell into the cold water of the ocean bay. Unable to swim, he came up flailing and yelling. His friends were too far away to help him. But a few yards away, on another dock, a young man was sprawled out on a deck chair...sunbathing.

The floundering man screamed desperately as he was about to go down for the second time. The sunbather rolled over, sat up and watched the man thrashing in the water. He yawned with bored detachment as the frantic man went down for the third time, and then slipped out of sight. With a shrug, he settled back into his deck chair and resumed his nap.

By the time the drowned man's friends arrived at the dock, they were outraged—especially when they discovered that the sunbather was an excellent swimmer. The family of the deceased was so upset by this callous display of indifference that they sued him.

In a landmark case, the Supreme Court ruled that the sunbather had no legal responsibility to save the drowning man. One thinks of Cain's question: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Justices gave a shocking answer to that ancient query: "No, you are not your brother's keeper."

Apathy may be legal, but it is also immoral. St. Augustine said, "Apathy, and not hatred, is the opposite of love." George Bernard Shaw wrote,

"The worst sin against our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them—that is the essence of inhumanity."

The word *apathy* comes from a combination of two Latin words: "to be without passion." Apathy is neither hot nor cold. To be apathetic is to feel nothing. Apathy is summed up in the words, "I could care less."

On the other hand, love and hate are inseparably intertwined. Nobel laureate Eugene O'Neill wrote, "You cannot hate unless you can first love." Hate and love are opposite sides of the *same* coin of passion. When I counsel a couple whose marriage is on the rocks, if I see hatred I know that there is still some hope. But, if there is only indifference, it is hopeless.

To continue sunbathing when a fellow human is drowning is the worst kind of inhumanity. To remain silent in the face of evil is more than cowardice; it is unspeakable cruelty. One thinks of an oft-quoted dictum: "All it takes for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing."

Which brings me to the issue of God's wrath. Lots of folks struggle with the doctrine that a loving God could also be an *angry* God. The Old Testament God who wipes out the earth with a flood, or rains down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah, or sends plagues on evildoers seems so primitive. To many, this is the God of narrow-minded fundamentalism.

Our postmodern age is one of tolerance. After years of research, pollster George Barna describes the theology of the majority of today's Evangelicals as *Therapeutic Moralistic Narcissistic Deism*. It's *therapeutic* in that it is about becoming a healthier and happier person; *moralistic* because it's about doing good; *narcissistic* because it revolves around me; and *deistic* because it sees God as far away, irrelevant and uninvolved—unless he is needed in a dire emergency. Although he wrote this more than fifty years ago, C.S. Lewis could have been talking about postmodern Christians when he observed,

“We are quite happy to have a God who leaves us alone to do as we please; a permissive grandfather who pats us on the head at the end of the day and says, ‘I hope that a good time was had by all.’”

Wait a minute! Isn't this God like the sunbather in Massachusetts? Do you want him sitting passively in heaven while you are drowning? Do you want him to watch apathetically when you are doing stupid and sinful things that will take you over Niagara Falls? Do you wish him to be the permissive grandfather while people are shoving others under the water, or even when you are in the act of drowning someone? In short, do you want a God who impotently smiles or shrugs his shoulders in the face of evil?

Apathy is the opposite of love, but our God burns with passion. He is not some syrupy sweet *Church Lady* who mouths that sentimental old cliché, “Hate the sin but love the sinner.” Instead, he passionately hates *all* sin, and sometimes he even hates sinners. In today's edition of *Pursuing the Heart of God*, those of us who want to seize his heart need to grab hold of a shocking but true principle:

There is hatred in holiness.

This is strong stuff in an age of political correctness that has made an idol of tolerance. The concept of holiness is passé in postmodernism. But our God *is* holy. When the angels praise him in heaven, they repeat the same phrase, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty...” And those of us who have been created in his image, and then recreated in the likeness of Christ, need to heed God's command in 2 Peter 1:16: “**Be holy, because I am holy.**”

God is not apathetic about those of us who are the apple of his eye. He will not sit idly by when we are unholy, or when we do unholy things to others. We need to hear again the chilling words of Hebrews 10:31: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” This is not a passive

God, but a living, jealous, holy, passionate consuming fire. You do not want to fall into his hands when you are doing that which is unholy.

Nothing teaches this fact more than what happened to King David. When he fell into the arms of adultery, he also fell into the hands of the living God. He tried to cover up his illicit affair and minimize the consequences. Like politicians everywhere, he angled for a soft landing. Instead, he crashed. Everyone connected to him was burned in that fiery crash. He might have wished that God was the apathetic sunbather, who yawned listlessly while he drowned himself and others, but our Lord hates sin with a holy passion.

Remember, apathy is the opposite of love. But Hebrews 12:6 says, "The Lord disciplines *those he loves*, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." He will not let us sin and get away with it. That's why we need to go back frequently to King David's story and learn these three truths:

1. THE ROAD TO RUIN IS PAVED WITH APATHY

David was at the peak of his prime, around fifty years of age. In twenty years as a warrior king, he had extended Israel's borders and forged the Israeli army into the preeminent power in the Middle East. 2 Samuel 8:14 says, "David ruled over all Israel, doing what was just and right for all his people." Not only was he popular with his subjects, he was highly favored by God. 2 Samuel 5:10 reports, "And he became more and more powerful because the Lord Almighty was with him."

The great failure of David's life came at the zenith of his success. The 19th Century social critic Thomas Carlyle wrote, "Adversity is sometimes hard; but for everyone who can't stand adversity, there are a hundred who can't stand prosperity." Lord Archibald Acheson famously said, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." St. Paul warns us in I Corinthians 10:12, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." Apathy is the child of arrogance. I learn three things from David's apathy:

THE BATTLE IS NEVER OVER

2 Samuel 11:1 sets the stage for King David's descent into darkness:

"In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem."

Kings go off to war in the springtime, but David stayed home. Like a lot of middle-aged men, he got lazy. He was satisfied to live off the memories of past victories. He figured that he could kick back and let others fight his battles for him. Watch out, David! The old proverb may be cliché, but it is painfully true: "Idle hands are the devil's tools."

In the spiritual realm, we are called to a neverending battle. 1 Peter 5:8&9 says, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him..." This battle is never over. There is never a furlough or truce in this war. There are no neutral zones. Old soldiers don't get to retire. The enemy of your soul will wage a brutal war of attrition against you until the day you die.

In the Swiss Alps, there is a famous graveyard reserved for mountain climbers. A message is inscribed on one tombstone: "He died climbing." David neglected the cardinal rule of victorious spirituality: You can't stop at the top! When you stop growing, you start dying. Once you opt out of the war, the roaring lion will pounce on you while you are taking your ease.

FEROCIOUS LIONS DON'T MAKE GOOD PETS

2 Samuel 11:2-4 tells us what David did during his early retirement:

"One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, 'Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite?' Then David sent messengers to get her."

What a pathetic sight! The Psalmist becomes a "Peeping Tom." The slayer of giants hides in the shadows and watches a woman taking her evening bath. He should turn away, but he toys with his lust until he has to have her. One of his advisors warns him that she is a married woman. More than that, she is the wife of his loyal captain Uriah, who is away fighting his battles for him. That alone should stop any decent king in his tracks.

But David is a he-man with a *she*-weakness. For years he has been a womanizer and gotten away with it. The Law of Moses strictly forbids kings of Israel from marrying more than one wife. But he now has several wives, and even more concubines. Remember, the devil is a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. David has played with the lion of lust for years.

Like David, each of us has that one abiding sin. We think that we can tame the lion. We bring our lion out of the cage, and play with it like a pet cat, whenever the fancy strikes us. After President Clinton had his affair with Monica Lewinski, he said to newscaster Dan Rather, "I did it, because I could." David might have said the same thing about his affair with Bathsheba. The lion of our abiding sin purrs softly and we get careless, arrogant, and then apathetic. But, when we least expect it, the lion pounces and devours us. We do well to remember Genesis 4:7, where God warns an angry Cain, "...sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." To become indifferent to the power of sin is a fatal apathy.

COVER-UPS NEVER STAY COVERED UP

Having been indifferent to the importance of spiritual warfare, the power of the lion and his own weakness, David now becomes apathetic to the consequences of sin. Galatians 6:7 warns us, "Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man *will* reap what he sows." God hates sin. He will not allow us to do evil and get away with it. But David thinks he can outwit God. When Bathsheba turns up pregnant, he sends for her husband Uriah. He uses every trick at his disposal to get Uriah to sleep with his wife. But Uriah will not enjoy the pleasures of marriage while his comrades are dying on the frontlines. So David arranges for Uriah to be killed, and marries the grieving widow. But, like politicians everywhere, he discovers that the cover-up is more damaging than the original sin. God's judgment intensifies. The baby of his adultery falls fatally ill. David fasts and prays, but to no avail. After his secret sin turns to public humiliation, his family falls apart, his nation turns against him, and his country dissolves into Civil War. Indeed, it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Remember, apathy is the opposite of love. Indifference is at the heart of all ungodliness. David lost his passion for God. He became passive when it came to warring against the enemy of his soul. But worse than toying with the lion, is thinking that he could play with a consuming fire like God.

2. GOD DESPISES THAT WHICH DESPISES HIM

There is hatred in holiness. In 2 Samuel 12:9, as the prophet Nathan speaks for God, he says, "Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?" Did you catch that word *despise*? The Hebrew word *despise* is a form of apathy. It literally means "to shrug it off as trivial" or "to demean it as unimportant." This is an *unholy* hatred. But God has a *holy* hatred toward those who are apathetic toward the things that mean everything to him—such as the following:

DESPISING GOD'S GRACE

In verses 7-9 Nathan lists what God gave David: "...I appointed you king over Israel and delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house...your master's wives...the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this would have been too little, I would have given you even more." Adam was created from the dust, yet God made him lord over paradise. Abraham was a pagan, but God made him the father of his people. Moses was a murderer, but God made him the founder of his nation. David was a shepherd, but God made him a king. Peter was a coward, but God used him to build the Church. History is the unbroken story of God's grace. He gives us what we do not deserve, and even more—if we ask. Why then do we sin? We have become apathetic toward his grace and shrugged it off as trivial. We have lost our sense of gratitude. We sin because we despise his grace.

DESPISING GOD'S WORD

Nathan goes on in verse nine: "Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes?" We sin because we want our own way rather than God's. After God graciously gave Adam and Eve paradise, he only asked one thing in return: obedience to a single command, "Don't eat the forbidden fruit." When they broke that one command, they broke his heart. There is only one thing he wants from us? Romans 8:29 says that we were "...predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." One quality in Christ stands out above the rest: he was obedient, even to the point of death. To become like Christ is to be obedient, even when it hurts.

Why is obedience so critical? Jesus says in John 14:21, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching." Obedience is at the heart of love. And, more than anything, God wants our love. You will always want to do the thing that pleases those you love. Conversely, if you do only that which pleases you, it is proof that you don't love them. When we trivialize God's desires as unimportant, we despise God himself.

DESPISING GOD'S CHILDREN

Nathan goes on in verses 9&10 to point out the people David sinned against. He sinned against Bathsheba. She had no choice in the matter. He was a king with absolute power. When he forced himself on her, it was tantamount to rape. He further abused power by ordering an innocent husband killed. He deceived his nation's trust by trying to cover it up. He corrupted the officials that he enticed into his conspiracy. There is no more bogus claim of postmodernism, than what we do in private between consenting adults doesn't hurt anyone. Six of the Ten Commandments are about loving your neighbors. When David got entangled in adultery, he violated all six: he dishonored his parents, he committed adultery, murdered, stole, lied, and coveted. He trivialized the devastating effects of self-gratification on others. Sin is never a private or personal matter. When we say, "How can it be so wrong when it feels so right?" we are only kidding ourselves. Worse than that, when we despise the harm we do to others, we are about to feel the holy hatred of the God who even weeps when a sparrow falls to the ground.

DESPISING THOSE WHO BEAR THE CONSEQUENCES

It would be bad enough if the results of sin only fell on the perpetrators. But innocent people are hurt too. Nathan speaks a terrifying word from the Lord in verse eleven: "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you." Sins may be private between consenting adults, but the consequences never are. David's family will be devastated. His children will become embittered. A son will rape his sister, and another will avenge her by murdering his brother. A rebellious son will lead a disillusioned nation into Civil War. Within fifty years Israel will unravel as a nation, never again to rise to its former glory. An old Israeli proverb says, "What is done in private will be shouted from the rooftops." Families suffer when fathers sin. Parents pay the price when children are rebellious. Nations are corrupted by corrupt leaders. Because we are all interconnected, when

people fall, they take down others with them. Is there a greater cruelty than gratifying your own pleasure to the harm of others? Unless of course, it is a God who would sunbath while we drown ourselves, or are drowning others!

3. HOLY LOVE WILL NOT ALLOW SIN TO GO UNPUNISHED OR GRACE TO GO UNSPENT

There would be no hope for David except for the words of 2 Samuel 12:13, "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'" He has been shaken out of his apathy by God's holy hatred of his sin. His repentance is immediate. When our sins are pointed out our only hope is to fess up *now*. Think about all the pain David might have saved himself had he listened to his advisor that night he craved Bathsheba! He could have spared even more grief if he came clean when she turned up pregnant. When we try to angle for a soft landing by trying to avoid the humiliation of repentance, we only manage to make the inevitable crash a lot worse.

But at least David finally comes clean. No matter how long you've kept the secret, it is never too late to repent—as long as you are still on this side of eternity. There are two things about this repentance: 1) He takes full responsibility for his actions. "I have sinned..." He doesn't blame anyone else, or make excuses or rationalizations. He doesn't try to minimize the heinousness of his acts or the consequences they deserve. 2) He knows that he has offended a holy God. "I have sinned *against the Lord*." All of our sins against others are first and foremost against God. Let's be as brutally-frank as Nathan the prophet: though we might want to sanitize our sins, they were committed for one reason only: we despised our God and his grace.

But thank God for Nathan's response in verse thirteen: "The Lord has taken away your sin." On this side of the Cross, we would say, "The Lord Jesus has carried away your sin." God has made a way out through the Cross of Jesus. He hates sin. Sometimes he even hates sinners. But he always loves the sinner who repents and returns to his grace. That doesn't mean that there won't be consequences. We may trivialize God's grace, but he will never trivialize our sins. He loves us too much to let us get off with a light sentence so that we can go on our merry way hurting others again. Yet, at the same time, he gives grace to us as we go through the painful process of discipline. David lost the "love" child that came out of his adultery. But God gave David and Bathsheba another son named Solomon. Verse 25 says that God gave Solomon the name *Jedidiah*, which means "beloved by the Lord." Remember love and hate are intertwined. Years later David wrote in Psalm 30:5, "Weeping my remain for a night, but joy comes in the morning."

Maybe today you are struggling with sin or its consequences. If you are tempted to sin, don't! God is not sunbathing. If you are playing with the lion of lust, stop it! Such apathy will get you killed, and hurt those who are closest to you. If you are covering up a sin, confess it. If you have been exposed, repent immediately. If you are overwhelmed by guilt, grab hold of the cross. If you are discouraged by God's discipline, don't give up. Your

best days are yet to come. Your God is so passionate about you and your future that he will not rest until you are transformed into his Son's likeness.

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