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WHAT KIND OF GOD?

By Ron Allen

There is something odious about being misrepresented. A person feels violated, his/her true self has been subverted. People will go to court and spend fortunes if they think they have been defamed. If less than perfect humans are distressed when others believe things of them that aren't true, think how God must feel when his name is associated with things abhorrent to him.

Mark's eleventh chapter focuses on Jesus' arrival at the temple. It is the climax of a journey begun perhaps weeks before. It has been a pageant revealing the wonder and power of Jesus' unique person. Every character that Jesus has met along the way has become a participant in an unfolding drama. People are drawn to him. A crowd of pilgrims, on their way to

unbroken colt is brought. People throw their cloaks over its back and Jesus mounts. Spontaneous singing of the Psalm 118 breaks out: *Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David.* As they sing, people offer royal honors to Jesus by placing their garments on the ground for his colt to walk over. The whole scene is a rehearsal of Jewish faith and hope.

Though Jesus' entry to Zion is kingly, his kingship is nevertheless ambiguous. It is implied but its real nature remains obscure. The shouting and singing and royal honors die away and the crowd disperses. There is an anticlimactic air. The scene moves quickly to the temple. Jesus and his twelve disciples pay a visit. *"He went to the temple and looked*

around at everything" (Mark 11:11). That simple sentence reports Jesus' arrival at his goal. He has reached the nerve center of Judaism. Almost everything he says and does from now on will occur within the temple precincts.

Jesus' 'looking around at everything' is portentous. He is not some Jewish tourist in from the dispersion to glimpse the glories of the temple he had heard about but never seen before. No this is the King! This is the temple subjected to the searching gaze of the One who knows everything that is done in it. Jesus' arrival means the temple's day of judgment has come.

We do not wait long to learn what Jesus thinks of what he sees. The very next day he enters the outer perimeter of the temple complex—the court of the Gentiles—and interrupts the currency traders and the sacrificial animal vendors. His action is abrupt, coercive, and provocative. He overturns the stalls. Tables go crashing, animals run loose, birds flutter into the air, and coins roll haphazardly along the hard stones. *"Is it not written,"* he says angrily, *"my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers"* (Mark 11:17).

When Jesus had crested the Mount of Olives on his approach to the city, he passed four markets where pilgrims

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... which Jerusalem is called to rejoice at the arrival of its king.

Jerusalem for the Feast, builds around him.

At last the city comes into view. Jesus contrives an approach to it that recalls the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 in which Jerusalem is called to rejoice at the arrival of its king. The

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EDITORIAL . . .

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector” (Luke 18:10).

Two men approach a recognized house of worship; a place of meeting with God. Both are religious. Neither one can imagine an existence with no validating encounter with God. They bring themselves before the One from whom they hope to receive an integrating, ultimate word of life.

Both come praying. The body language of the Pharisee bespeaks the confidence that expects to be well received. The tax collector is more tentative. He lingers at the back.

The first worshiper comes from a respected class within society. Everyone knows that Pharisees are devout, righteous people. His prayer dwells on just that theme. He thanks God that he is better than other people: others like that tax collector.

Whereas the Pharisee saw himself as alone in his virtue, the tax collector feels isolated in his unworthiness. He prays only that God will show mercy to him. The Pharisee separates himself from other people through his self-righteousness. The tax collector is alienated by guilt.


There is an unexpected punch-line to this story. It comes when we learn that the respected gentleman standing right near the altar finds no word of approval from God. Yet the dubious, hang-dog figure at the back of the room receives God's word of acquittal. He goes home justified.

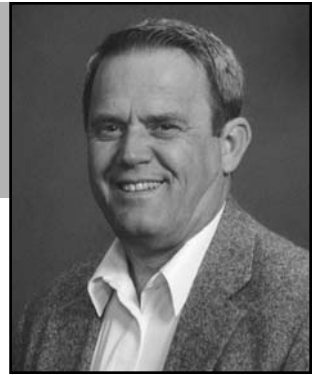
How can this be? The individual most looked-up to, and considered the most successful by his community, is not commended. Why not? From his own prayerful lips we know how upright he is. He doesn't steal, fornicate. He tithes his income and fasts twice a week—the law only called for a weekly fast. So he does more than the law. He not only matches God, he exceeds him!

Here lies the problem. He doesn't really need God. He is better than him. He is not a worshiper. He wants God to worship

him. The tax collector's view of God and of himself is truer. He is aware of a chasm between himself and his maker. He is not a plus, he is a minus. He is not full, he is empty. He knows he is a sinner because he measures himself against God, not against other men.

The tax collector does not ask God for justice. The first worshiper expected to be well received; that would only be fair! Hadn't he given God all he wanted—and more? Not the tax collector. He seeks mercy only, and he is the One God declares righteous.

So it is, and so it will be for all who seek God—not for what they can do for him—but who seek God for himself; for all that he is able to do, even for the disgraceful and disreputable. 



Pastor Ron Allen



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CAN'T BUY ME LOVE

The Beatles were right. “Money can’t buy me love,” but the process of exchange and the intricacies of cost-benefit analysis have led many people to the opposite conclusion.

They believe that the only love they will get is the love they will pay for.


Some social theorists have developed this perspective as a general view of human relationships. Exchange theorists in sociology and economics see relationships in terms of transactions through which players seek to maximize their satisfaction. On this view, our relationships grow out of mean calculations, as we are all very lonely.... Their mistake is to see this approach as normal rather than a breakdown of love. When people believe they must buy



... all that you can hold.

love, or will sell it only if they receive a good price, they can no longer give of themselves or receive from others. Love becomes a process of take and give, a series of transactions in which we all calculate what we can get. We have an inner obsession with our rewards, and with what we can get out of it. Sometimes wants develop into needs; the things we need for love become absolute demands which create or can be subject to exploitation.

How strongly this contrasts with Jesus’ words: “Give to others and God will give to you. Indeed, you will receive a full measure, a generous helping, poured into your hands—all that you can hold” (Luke 6:38).

-Alan Storkey. MEANINGS OF LOVE, p. 116. 

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could purchase ritually acceptable animals for use in temple worship. These markets had been put there by the Sanhedrin. Sometime during Christ’s lifetime, priests—in order to satisfy their corruptions—set up an alternative marketplace in the court of the Gentiles. The effect of this innovation was to transform the outer temple enclosure into a bazaar. Doves—the recognized sacrificial offering of the poor—were sold at fixed prices. Other ritual paraphernalia was for sale: wine, salt, oil.

According to the Law of Moses (Exodus 30:13-16), the annual temple tax obligation had to be paid using the temple shekel, but this money had gone out of circulation by this time. Roman coins were the currency of the day. The closest thing to the original was the Phoenician shekel. Temple authorities insisted that worshippers pay their temple dues with this Phoenician shekel. This is where the currency traders came in. Under the watchful eye of the priests, they did a brisk trade.


The temple had become a business. Jesus attacked the temple trade because it misrepresented God. It bore witness to a profiteering god; a god that needed money. His expulsion of the temple traders is couched in the language and lore of Israel’s prophets. He finds Scriptural warrant for his action in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and Malachi. Jeremiah had risked the wrath of his people by castigating them for their irreverent impudence in pursuit of adultery, lies, theft, and having the gall to come to the temple to worship—as if to implicate the Lord in their detestable practices. After this rebuke, the priests and prophets tried to kill Jeremiah.

Jesus echoes the imagery of Malachi 3:1, 2 which foresees that the “Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple to sit in judgment. He will sit as a refiner, a purifier of the Levites.” He is also consistent with Zechariah’s vision of the re-establishing of genuine worship of God at the Jerusalem temple. When that day comes “there will no longer be a Canaanite (merchant) in the house of the Lord” (Zechariah 14:21).

Christ’s temple raid was “zeal for God,” a well established prophetic tradition. The anger that flashed through him, intimidating the merchants and putting them to flight, revealed the righteous indignation of God whose name had been subverted, whose house had been stolen from him and made to serve the ambitions of vendors and dealers.

The ideal house of worship has no place for “merchants.” The business of God’s house is not ‘business.’ Jesus had warned that it is not possible to serve both God and money (*mammon*, the Aramaic word for wealth). See Matthew 6; Luke 16. “No man can serve two masters,” Jesus said. In referring to money as a Master, Jesus displayed unique insight into its role in human life. Money is never confined to a purely utilitarian role. Its default position is that of Master.

Ever since money first appeared in human life it has been a pushy third force. It inserts itself between individuals and groups so that the immediate, natural, person-to-person interface is transformed into that of buyer and seller. Money thereby establishes a distortion between persons, between groups and classes.

To Be Continued. 

LEGALISM and its ANTIDOTES *(concluded)*

By Dominic Smart

Seventh, legalism produces a false gospel; one that is, as the Scriptures say, no gospel at all. Why is it a false gospel that legalism presents and makes us live by? Because, by it we seek to be justified on the basis of law, not faith. And whatever our pride, or the devil may tell us, we will never accomplish what we seek. Its is no gospel because it is bad news. It amounts to: “Do these things and you shall live; by the way, you’ll never be able to do them.”

Now the setting of Galatians is that legalists have cut in on believers; they have been bewitched and duped into another principle by which to live with God. Not only does legalism produce a false gospel of works by which sinners are called to save themselves by a good work called repentance, but it then couches the rest of the Christian life in terms of more works; as if we were saved *by* good works rather than *for* good works. The ground for our security thus shifts from Christ—his finished work for us and his ever living to make intercession for us—to our good works.

Eighth, legalism robs God. This is the worst aspect of it—and the sum of the previous seven. It is legalism’s sin. It is this that makes it more than just a problem for some personality types. God, in his majesty and glory, is glorified by our faith. By faith we say to him that we are insufficient and that he alone is sufficient to save and keep us. Legalism inverts the biblical order of covenant, justification, law. Legalism robs God of the glory due his name. The glory of the gospel of his redeeming grace in Christ, the glory of his tender and merciful perseverance with us, and the glory of the Spirit’s sanctifying power. By legalities we assume a power to save and to keep; we usurp the Spirit’s office, and we create a life that cannot feel the joy of the freedom of the children of God. No wonder the worship is so mind-bogglingly lifeless. No wonder the legalist’s soul never soars with praise.

Legalism is not without its antidotes. The first seems least likely—particularly to a legalist—**A greater view of sin.** The legalistic mind has too small view of sin. It thinks it can deal with sin with a few rules. But rules are never going to deal with sin. It was the classic mistake of the Scribes and Pharisees to reduce righteousness to a technicality (getting the paperwork right). Sin becomes a superficial problem with no root in the heart. If it’s all a matter of the details of behavior you can solve it yourself with a few hundred rules.

When you superficialize sin, you actually end up protecting it. You give it a safe, untouched haven in the heart. The storms of law can rage on the outside while the sinfulness of the heart goes unchallenged. That’s why some of the most legalistic people can harbor really wicked attitudes and practices. It’s why you can strain at a gnat and swallow a camel.

What but the power of God can break the power of sin? What but **the victory of Christ** can free us from captivity to sin? What but the life of God can overcome the deadliness of sin? Shake a rule book at sin and Satan laughs in derision. Legalism should quake before the biblical teaching about sin. God in his grace has given us the truth about sin and it should be enough to drive us—not to the rule book—but to Christ.

Second, the holiness of God. Legalism can’t touch sin; neither can it answer the holiness of God. I keep the house rules about clothing, what I can or can’t do on the Lord’s day, cinema, music, wine, witnessing, whatever; but maybe I don’t love my neighbor as myself. Do I fondly imagine that God weighs the ‘good bits’ which my rule keeping has provided against my bad habits? And as he watches the scale tip down on the good side, he declares me righteous in his sight? Is that how it works? We know that it is not so, but the legalist functions as if it were. This “un-holiness” of God—his being satisfied with a few checks on our list; him being just a bigger version of us and not actually God—gives credibility to the effectiveness of the legalized life. But get one glimpse of the holiness of God, one tiny, brief glimpse, and any notion of personal adequacy shrivels.

I’ve known some legalists in my time, and the one thing that has *never* struck me about them is their knowing God in a way that brings silence and awe-struck reverence.

The cures need to work together, so to the third cure—**grace.** Grace to save the sinner and grace to keep the sinner saved. Grace to make us holy and grace to bring us to glory. Even as I write the word grace, the sun comes out in my soul. Writing about legalism is really hard writing. It makes me realize how all-permeating legalism’s smog is. It becomes the air that some Christians breathe. It gets in the clothes and the furniture, stains the décor, sits in the lungs, clouds every horizon.

Grace is like the warmth of the life-giving sun; like the sparkling exhilaration of the vast ocean. It is like a great swell of sanity and peace; like a resting, satisfied calm of perfect contentment. If one glimpse of the holiness of God can cure us of our self-trust, shouldn’t it be that one moment in the world of grace should forever ruin us for the world of law? What hope has legalism’s whine before the booming glory of the grace of God.

-Dominic Smart. 



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