

## “What God Hates”

Reading: Psalm 50; Isaiah 1:10-20

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As I was preparing for this sermon I kept getting stuck on just a few words out of our passage from Isaiah, the part where God says, “Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I *hate* with all my being.” It’s a little startling to see God talking about *hating* something. God is love, right, according to the New Testament? And haven’t I been saying in recent weeks how the God we see in the Old Testament is the same God we see in the New Testament? It’s a myth that the “Old Testament God” is angry and wrathful and mean, while the “New Testament God” is loving and nice. But here we see God giving expression to His hatred for something, and in fact He’s saying that He hates something He commanded His people to do. Those feasts and festivals were part of God’s law, and now He seems to be changing His mind for no apparent reason. Isn’t this exactly the sort of thing a capricious, arbitrary, “Old Testament God” might say?

Hate is a strong word, and to see God talking about how much He hates something might just reinforce the difficulty some people have with believing that God is truly *good*, that He can be trusted to be good, and that He is in fact the very definition of goodness. So I got stuck on this word “hate,” because it seems noteworthy when God says He hates something. What does it mean? What sorts of things does God hate? How does God hate something? Because we might want to pay attention to it. It might be important for us to know how to live, because we probably don’t want to do things God hates. And beyond that it might be important for knowing what sort of God we’re serving, because maybe God really is petty and wrathful like people sometimes assume, and He gets upset at all sorts of unpredictable things.

Hatred for us has an emotional side to it, and it’s a strong emotion. We might say hatred is something we feel toward our enemies or toward someone who has done us a grievous wrong. For us it’s not just that I don’t like that person, that we don’t get along or haven’t bonded or aren’t friends. No, I *hate* that person, I actively dislike them and might even wish their harm. That’s part of why it’s so startling when Jesus commands us to love our enemies, because for us hating someone is kind of what defines them as our enemy. It’s not just a lack of good feelings toward someone, it’s an active disgust. I picture a child being forced to eat broccoli or Brussels sprouts: he *hates* them and thinks they’re disgusting, so he spits them out and makes a face.

But that’s not necessarily the meaning of hate in the Bible. It certainly can have that emotional side to it, but that’s not always the focus. A good example comes from the book of Malachi, where God says, “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” Again, that sounds to us like God is choosing favorites, as though He’s capricious and arbitrary and just plain mean. It’s looking back to the ancient time of the Patriarchs, when God was first establishing a covenant with humanity to restore their relationship with Him by first building a relationship with one family. Isaac, the son of Abraham, has twin sons, Jacob and Esau, and through a whole series of events God chooses Jacob as the one who will carry God’s covenant forward. So in this case, love and hate are not emotional terms, as though God is all gushy in His feelings toward Jacob and God is disgusted with Esau. No, God is using covenant language: a king says he loves those with whom he has a covenant relationship, and he hates those with whom he does not. God did not have a covenant relationship with Esau; He “hated” him. So in many cases in the Old Testament, “hate” does not have that emotional component to it

that we give it. It's much more the language of rejection; I turn my face away from this. So we have to be a bit nuanced if we're going to discover what it means for God to hate something.

Apart from our passage for today, what else might we say that God hates? If we were to take a quick poll of those of us gathered here or even among Christians in general, I'd bet the top answer would be that God hates sin. And in fact in much of the theology we hear from pulpits and books today, the hatred God has for sin does indeed have that emotional side to it: He *really* hates sin, He can't stand it, and it's disgusting to Him. It's a key part of some peoples' theology: God is holy, and for some people that means that God cannot tolerate the presence of sin because it's contrary to His being, and it's abhorrent to Him, and so something has to be done about our sin before we can even think of coming near to God. God hates sin, and we're sinful people from birth, and I've even heard preachers take it to the next level and say in essence that God therefore hates *us*. The only way to get the sin dealt with, the thinking goes, is basically to beat it out of us — the shedding of blood pays the penalty for the offense God takes toward sin, so in the Old Testament an innocent animal has to die every time you sin. But God is also somehow merciful in this theory, so God sent Jesus to suffer so much that He would take the penalty of everyone's sin and God's hatred would be satisfied. That's a bit of a simplification, but not much.

Let's shift our image from a little child eating broccoli to the stereotypical picture of a 1950s housewife jumping up on a chair with a scream whenever she sees a mouse: the mouse is abhorrent to her, she can't stand the sight of it, and she hates having it in her presence. That's God and His reaction to sin is some peoples' theology. Or maybe the image is of an uptight, high-strung sort of person who has just mopped their kitchen floor, and here you come walking across their nice clean floor with your muddy shoes from outside. Your sin is like filth clinging to you, and God's kitchen is clean, and how dare you get your filth on His nice, clean floor. He can't stand your mess, and He's coming after you with a rolling pin to vent His wrath on you.

The question is whether that's an accurate picture of God or not. Because if God is so thoroughly repulsed by our sin that He flies into an uncontrollable wrath at its presence, and if it's even a core part of God's being that He cannot be in the presence of sin — God is holy and we're sinful, remember, and holiness means He can't have sin in His presence — if that's true, then how could God have instructed His people to build a tabernacle and a temple in their midst so He could be present among them? How could God invite sinners to come into His temple courts to commune with Him through sacrifice? How could Jesus, who is God in the flesh, have sat down and shared a meal with drunks and cheats and prostitutes? I did a quick and unscholarly look through the Bible to see what it says about God's hatred, and lo and behold, the Bible doesn't actually say that God hates sin. I'm not saying that God is fine with sin and that anything goes — far from it; sin really is a huge problem — but maybe we should stop and take a closer look at what the Bible actually says about what God hates.

Our reading in Isaiah 1 is a perfect example of what God actually hates. The vast majority of times in the Bible when someone hates something refer to a human hating something, hating either God or God's people or another person. Out of more than a hundred mentions of "hate" or some variation in the Bible, only about a dozen refer to God hating something or someone. In Deuteronomy, God hates idolatry and detestable practices like human sacrifice. In Psalm 11, God hates those who love violence. In Proverbs 6:17, God hates seven things: haughty eyes, a lying

tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, a false witness who pours out lies, and a person who stirs up conflict in the community. In Jeremiah, God hates the faithlessness of His people. In Amos, God hates the peoples' religious festivals. In Zechariah, it's plotting evil and swearing falsely. In Revelation, God hates the heretical beliefs and practices of a schismatic sect that was causing problems in the church.

A couple of other examples to consider. One of the scholars I read used Exodus 32 through 34 as an example of how a holy God can't tolerate sin in His presence. That's the passage where God's people have been worshipping a golden idol of a calf, and God is concerned about leading His people through the wilderness because "If I were to go with you even for a moment, I might destroy you," as though God's holiness might just break out and scorch them because of their sin. But if we pay attention, it's not just their sin that bothers God, it's that "you are a stiff-necked people." We might also consider 2 Kings 17, which explains why God finally allowed the destruction of Israel. Was it because of sin broadly speaking, and God just couldn't hold Himself back any longer? No, it was because they were "stiff-necked." It wasn't just that they were sinful, it was that they were persistently, unrepentantly sinful.

What can we learn from this? It isn't sin itself that God hates as much as a particular type of sin. It's not the state of being a sinner or being imperfect or making mistakes that makes God turn His face away. He hates hypocrisy. He hates the outward show of religion without the inward devotion of a person reliant on God. He hates rebellion, that unrepentant state of rejecting God's ways while trying to manipulate God because you think you can pull a fast one on Him. In Isaiah 1, He hates their religious festivals and feasts not because God is arbitrary and cranky, but because the people were using the rituals as a magic method for appeasing what they hoped was a disinterested god while they committed injustice after injustice against one another. It was the form of religion without the life transformation. They were using the forms of worship, which God had given them as a means of knowing Him and loving Him, as a means of distracting Him from the abuses they were heaping on one another. What God can't stand is the sinner with no desire for change, the hypocrite, the rebel.

Again, that doesn't mean that God is okay with sins that aren't obviously hypocritical, as though what God loves is an honest sinner, or someone who is *sincere* in their sin. No, sin is such a problem that God has acted decisively in history to bring an end to sin, and He did it through His own humiliation and death. He does not take sin lightly. All sin is ultimately a rebellion against what we were made to be. All sin is ultimately a betrayal of the image of God in us, a hypocrisy of the soul we were meant to have. But there is sin and there is sin hidden under a veneer of religiosity, sin dressed up in holy vestments, sin defended using God's words, and that is the sort of sin that particularly makes God turn His face away. It's sin done when you should know better, when you want the benefits of God but aren't willing to welcome the work of His Spirit within you to transform you inside and out. If you take the time to be honest with yourself and listen honestly to God, you'll know it when you're living in that kind of sin.

But there's hope. For the Israelites, sacrifices were the outward sign of their relationship to God, and He says that those offerings are meaningless and detestable, which are words that would normally describe the sorts of things God rejects. So if God is rejecting your sacrifices, you're in bad shape. But "come now, let us settle the matter," God says to His people. You have the blood of injustice on your hands, but they can be clean. "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” Get your outer life and your inner life in order. It’s not just about being a good person, it’s about genuinely loving God with everything you’ve got.

Psalm 50 points us in the right direction. It’s a wonderful song in which God reminds His people that their sacrifices were not for His benefit. He didn’t call them to sacrifice animals because He was hungry or bloodthirsty or in need of their help. No, their sacrifices were meant to be their physical acts of prayer and communion with the God they loved. The psalm rests on some of the differences between the kinds of sacrifices the people could make, and it’s not immediately obvious to us. God says He has no need for their sacrifices or burnt offerings, which were the ones God required them to do at set times and for certain circumstances, and the people had apparently just made them a routine. Instead, God calls them to make thank offerings, which were voluntary acts of praise to God for His goodness and provision. You didn’t have to make those kinds of offerings; they weren’t just the routine. God is saying that what He wants is a relationship of love and gratitude, in which His people genuinely know Him and know His goodness. So the real question that should guide us today is not what God hates, but what God loves, and how we can live in that love.



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