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An Exposé of Idolatry, Part 5

Thomas Watson wrote:

There is as much difference between sin in the wicked, and sin in the godly as between poison being in a serpent, and poison being in a man. Poison in a serpent is in its natural place and is delightful, but poison in a man's body is harmful and he uses antidotes to expel it. So sin in a wicked man is delightful, being in its natural place, but sin in a child of God is burdensome. (Watson, 2015, p. 113)

Isn't that the truth?! Yes, our flesh is alive and well and so enjoys sinning. Yet as ones who love the Lord we know that sin is a poison which in the end can only hurt us! In the words of

Peter, “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

The primary casualty in this war as Christians is the health of our walk with God. God’s work in the lives of His people at this time was, “In order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who are estranged from Me through all their idols” (Ezekiel 14:5). What impact did the idolatry of God’s people have in their walk with God? It estranged them from the Lord! The word speaks NOT of the destruction of a relationship, BUT its compromise! It denotes separation, alienation, and so estrangement! This no doubt is why John Owen said, “Sin in the believer is a burden which afflicts him, rather than a pleasure which delights him.” (MacArthur, 2005, p. 1917)

Truly, as sin compromises the love-relationship we have with the Lord, the alienation that sin brings in our walk with God truly is a burden!

Now the question of the hour is: How is such alienation resolved? When estrangement enters into our relationship with God, what must happen if there is to be restoration? GOD- not man- MUST ACT! This is NOT to say that as God’s children we have no responsibility when it comes to the life of holiness, rather it is to say that if there is to be growth and maturation in our walks, God first must act!

As that is true, our understanding of the rather strong response that God has to the sin of His people as recorded here in Ezekiel takes on a whole new light. What is before us is NOT an angry God lashing out at His people on account of their sin. RATHER, we have here the acts of a loving God who will not allow His people to remain in their sin. In other words, the text we have been examining the past couple of weeks is NOT condemnation, BUT reclamation!

Because that is the case, what is God’s objective when it comes to addressing Idolatry when it settles in the heart of a Christian? What ultimately is God after? Ezekiel gives us a definitive answer showing us God’s sanctifying work.

One aim of God in addressing sin in His people is to lay hold of their hearts.

Ezekiel 14:4b-5a, “...I the Lord will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols, in order to lay hold of [this is a strong word in the Hebrew (טָפַסַּתּוּ [taphas]), used of the forceful apprehension of prisoners and captives or the violent conquest of a city; truly when it comes to our sanctification, God doesn’t play around] the hearts of the house of Israel...”

Recall, the anatomy of ancient Judaism looked upon the psychology of a man a little differently than do we. In our understanding:

- The head is that which thinks, reasons, and considers.
- The heart is the seat of emotion and feeling.

- The belly/gut is the basis for intuition, “It didn’t sit well with my gut!”

In Judaism, it was somewhat different.

- The head was understood as that which represented the entire person.¹
- The bowels were the seat of emotion- which is why we frequently read of Christ being moved in His gut (cf. Matthew 9:36)! That is the essence of “compassion.”
- It was the “heart” that was understood to be responsible for thought, reasoning, will, and understanding.

Accordingly, when Ezekiel said that “...these men have set up their idols in their hearts” (Ezekiel 14:3), the focus is on their thinking! God’s people had a major flaw in their theology as it related to the Lord. Recall, they drew into question God’s love as well as His faithfulness!

Ezekiel 8:12, “Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? FOR THEY SAY [this was the beginning of their idolatry], “The Lord does not see us [meaning, He doesn’t love nor care about us]; the Lord has forsaken the land [meaning, He has not been faithful to His covenant promises].””

In this regard, we understand God’s first objective when it comes to reclaiming the sinning child of God, He is after their heart/mind! Truly, what we think about God and what we believe is of utmost importance. Accordingly, we ought NOT to be surprised that the telos/purpose in God giving us the Revelation of His word is instruction.

2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.”

The reason God gave us His word was so that we might be:

- Informed where we lack the knowledge of the truth.
- Rebuked when we stray from the truth.
- Corrected that we might walk in the truth.
- Trained that we might stay in the truth!

That is the intended purpose and effect of God’s word in our lives!

A large part of Christ’s ministry in His first advent was teaching/instruction in God’s word. Speaking of Christ, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to...” (Titus 2:11-12a). Christ came first and foremost to teach/instruct/educate! Accordingly, He was known NOT as a “Miracle Max” (though He did many miracles). RATHER He was known for His teaching!

After Christ preached the Sermon on the Mount, recall that which stood out to the crowd, “The result was that when Jesus had finished these words, the multitudes were amazed [NOT at His miracles, His look of love, His gentle disposition, BUT...] at His teaching” (Matthew 7:28).

A large part of the ministry of a faithful church is instruction. Listen to the Great Commission with fresh ears, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations... [literally, ‘a learner’ of God! How do we do this? By...] baptizing them... and teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...” (Matthew 28:18, 19, 20). Truly what we think when it comes to God and His Kingdom is of utmost importance. Therefore, a major part of any God-directed ministry will be teaching! We see this reflected in the calling of the “pastor/teacher” of Ephesians 4.

Notice, THE objective of any godly leadership as well as any healthy ministry is, “...the unity of the faith, and... the knowledge of the Son of God...” (Ephesians 4:13b). This properly is a major part of Kingdom ministry!

A large part of our health as a church is our ability to profess truth. Recall Paul’s solution for the discord that plagued the Corinthian church?, “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment”(1 Corinthians 1:10). Any time there is division between Christians there exists a fundamental difference in their understanding of truth!

Listen to Paul’s exhortation, “If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion [Paul’s use of the conditional ‘if’ serves to root these four virtues- encouragement, love, fellowship, and compassion- in what follows...], make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose”(Philippians 2:1-2). It is only as we grow in our ability to profess truth together that we as a church will enjoy mutual encouragement, love, fellowship, and compassion!

From all of this I hope you see how important truth is when it comes to the Kingdom of God and the believer. God is all about seizing our hearts and so leading us in truth! WHY is that?

The Fall occurred when Satan successfully got Adam and Eve to question the truth about God and so relegate God’s word to an hypothesis to be tested and judged by the believer (cf. Genesis 3:1-5)! It was when and only when Adam and Eve allowed their feelings to dictate what their mind thought; when they were “carried away and enticed by their lusts” (cf. James 1:14)- that they ate of the forbidden fruit (cf. Genesis 3:6)! And this has been the battle ground ever since!

Accordingly, our struggle as Christians is NOT against flesh and blood, BUT in the realm of thought, conviction, purpose, and so belief.

2 Corinthians 10:3-6, "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses [lit. high places]. *We are* destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God [our battle first and foremost pertains to the thoughts and beliefs of a man regarding Christ], and *we are* taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ [this is sanctification at its core... the submission of our heart/mind to the truth/obedience of Christ. And when it comes to body life and so the goal of our fellowship, it too revolves around submission to God's word...], and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete."

Accordingly, when it comes to the disciplining hand of the Lord, this is what God is after for His people... their minds/heart!

We need to realize that on account of the fall, there is a universal question that has and will continue to be posed to every man at all times in this state of sin and misery:

- Will you submit yourself to the truth of God's word?
- Or will you submit the truth of God's word to your understanding of reality?
- Will your knowledge and understanding of God and His kingdom be derived from His word?
- Or will you endeavor to come to a knowledge of truth via your daily interactions with man?²
- Will you today be content with yesterday's graces?
- Or will you renew your faith every morning as you spend time seeking God in His word?

Sadly, I fear that our generation of Christians is losing the battle here! Truth no longer is objective and so something to learn, BUT subjective. Accordingly, the focus of the church today in the US is no longer teaching/discipleship, but providing an event where the supernatural can be experienced. That today is what is meant by authentic Christianity. A gathering to emote about God. Yet get this! God is NOT a force to be experienced, BUT a Person able to be known, loved, worshipped, honored, and obeyed! Accordingly, the Bible is quite definitive when it comes to healthy Christian living.

Moses instructed the people of God, "The secret things [concerning the past, present, or future] belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed [that is, the word of God/truth] belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." (Deuteronomy 29:29). If there is any focus with by which we ought to be pre-occupied as Christians it is the word of God- specifically knowing and so living in light of it!

Paul exhorted us through Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." (2

Timothy 2:15). Do you understand that everyone of us will be judged by what we did with God's word?!

Recall Peter's exhortation to a people who prized experience over truth, far greater than any experience, "And so we have the prophetic word *made* more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19a). Peter's message here is very simple, because truth is more reliable than experience, our call as Christians is to give ourselves to understanding and so living in light of the truth of God's word! I love how he put it, "you would do well to pay attention to it!"

Now get this, we are NOT talking here about theology for the sake of theology. Rather, we are talking about knowing the truth in such a way that it radically transforms your thinking, desiring, and doing! If that is NOT happening in our lives, God will forcibly intervene, grab your heart/mind, and through His providence submit it to His word! This is God's first objective when it comes to sin in His children.

Notice His second objective is aimed at addressing sin in His people and their submission to His Lordship.

Ezekiel 14:8c, "And I shall set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I shall cut him off from among My people. So you will know that I am the Lord."

This dove-tails quite nicely with the last point. The battle that is raging right now on this earth is a battle for the heart and so the mind of man. When it comes to this battle, THE TELOS is always either the profession or the rejection of God as Lord/master! Again, the fall of man revolved around this theme! Satan's seemingly innocent inquiry drew into question whether or not Adam and Eve should submit to God's claim of authority over them. Recall the words of Dr. Robert Reymond:

What precisely occurred in Genesis 3? In answer, our first parents permitted the serpent, through their embarrassment with God's authority over them, to challenge God's Word with an alternative interpretation of the tree. When the pair demonstrated their unwillingness to believe God on the basis of His bare claim of authority over them by remaining silent in the face of the serpent's lie, they, by that silence, permitted Satan to *reduce* the Word of God to a mere *hypothesis*... This means, however, in a universe created by God that the center of authority, for man, shifted from another to himself. Man demanded that he become his own authority, that he determine for himself what is true and what is false. (Reymond, 1984, p. 19)

Accordingly, it is this question, the question of God's authority, that continues to drive man in his battle against God. We have a natural aversion to God and so any of His transcendent attributes:

- His sovereignty.
- His right to rule a person's life.
- His unquestionable will and purpose.
- His authority.

You want to stir a crowd into a frenzy today? Proclaim the teaching of God's word that homosexuality is a sin and so a sickness that God can fix! Tell them that God is in charge of a woman's womb! Indicate that a person is NOT free to do whatever they want in the privacy of their own home! But rather they have an obligation to God even there! Henry Law hit it on the head when he wrote:

Man's secret chambers of imagination swarm with thoughts tainted with dislike of God, His name, His nature, His perfections, His cause, His people, His Word, His scepter, His kingdom, His Christ. Sin has strong inclinations, and they all are arrayed against God's righteous ways. (Law, 2015)

That is why we ought NOT to be shocked that God's purpose and design when it comes to His disciplining grace is the Christian's submission to His Sovereign Authority! In fact, get this, this is where Redemptive as well as World History is headed.

After detailing Christ's humiliation, Paul said, "Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:9-11). Do you understand that the recognition of the Lordship of Christ, His sovereignty, regency, and right to rule- is where every event, every providence, and everything in this world is headed?

Accordingly we have here another major theme of Redemption (which by definition is the reclamation of fallen man and this fallen world by God)! What is that theme? The Authority/Lordship of Christ!

Accordingly, when God's people rebel against His authority (which is the essence of sin), do you now understand what God is doing in His disciplining grace? He is bringing them to the point where once again, "...[they] will know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 14:9)!

In this regard, let me exhort you! We have the strange idea that as moral beings we have the right to do whatever we want. Yes, God is Lord and so we must, in the end, give deference to Him (and we know eventually we will). But today, our submission to God is ever and always subject to our will. And so:

- Church attendance.

- Bible reading and study.
- Sabbath activities.
- Our church relationships.
- Our willingness to forgive another person.
- What we do with our money and time.

Are all viewed as optional/personal... as divine suggestions if we want to be holy/devoted to God. Rarely does the thought enter into our minds that God has definitive demands when it comes to these and all areas of life.

Yet as we have seen, God in fact does have specific demands when it comes to these areas and more. After all, He is Lord of life! Accordingly, what is behind God's disciplining hand in our lives? It is:

- To bring the child of God to a fuller understanding of God's rights and claims as the Sovereign Lord of the Universe!
- Bringing every thought of the child of God captive to the obedience of Christ!
- In this regard, a large part of the call of Sanctification is our submission to the Lordship of Christ.

For example, Paul wrote, "For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived *again*, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Romans 14:7-9). This is what is behind every battle when it comes to our sanctification! Accordingly we are exhorted in:

Romans 6:12-14a, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. FOR sin shall not be master over you [the implication is that only God is!!]..."

1Corinthians 6:19-20, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."

I could go on citing passage after passage. The Point? God is all about our submission to His authority. When we choose sin over God- when we issue a declaration of independence from God and willfully sin- you can be sure that the Lord in His grace and mercy will intervene in our lives to discipline us!

In the words of the 70's praise song, "He loves you just the way you are today, but much too much to let you stay that way!"

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End Note(s)

¹ Thus when Paul calls us to “take the helmet of salvation” (Ephesians 6:17a) in our fight against Satan and his demons (helmets are that which protect the head), the apostle is referencing a virtue that protects the entirety of our Christianity... and what is that which protects the entirety of our walk with God? The assurance of our salvation!

² Is it any wonder that in the spirit of the age today there is such a heavy push or group/peer teaching and interaction when comes to education. Now we must be careful here NOT to throw the baby out with the bath water; yet the emphasis and push today in education on shared experience in my estimation is aberrant!