

Sermon 34: Revelation 9:20-21: Hardness of heart

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

The puritans used to say that our worst enemy is not the devil but ourselves, and the worst judgement we can receive is to be handed over to ourselves. This is the judgement of God upon those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness in Romans 1 and the judgement of God in Revelation 9:20-21, 'The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, 21 nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.' Another saying of the older writers is this, 'the same sun that melts butter hardens clay.' Here we see that as God pours out judgements, just as with Pharaoh during the 10 plagues, the judgements do not soften hearts but harden them. Sometimes God by means of hardship causes us to turn to Him and not from Him, but if He is acting in judgement affliction will have no effect and even turn people from God.

Theodicy

Epicurus lived 300 years before Jesus and struggled over the existence of God in the face of evil. He is the one who gave us the troublesome questions: if God is good why do we suffer, if God is powerful why doesn't He stop evil? The implications are felt to be that if God is neither good nor powerful proven by the existence of evil, then God does not exist, and you can live in sin living any way you please because judgement is also not real. The trouble is that this set of questions does not carry the necessary biblical assumptions within it. There is no assumption of man's sinfulness, living in a fallen world and all of mankind being worthy of punishment. This argument runs on the assumption that difficulty is unfair. There is no assumption of God's patience in not pouring out justice right now, which is what every person in their suffering usually cries out for. It is not assumed that the difficulty of life is a sign of God's goodness that He did not wipe out humanity in Eden, or that God has deliberately chosen the shape of the collateral damage of the first sin for very particular purposes like sanctification.

When people turn from God because of the argument that a good God cannot exist in the face of evil, they are not unbiased judges. They forget that at the heart of their own self lies depravity. There is an insanity in us where we deliberately choose the bad even though it promises less yields, even though it will hurt us, even though we will hurt our loved ones and even though it will end in judgement. We believe lies, tell lies to ourselves, refuse to consider long term consequences in the face of instant gratification and prefer our own reshaped truths even though we can make nothing perfect, or create reality by positive

thinking. This is the insanity we are seeing in the text before us. The demons that lie behind idolatry are the demons that have tormented these idolaters, yet they refuse to give up their idols and serve the true God. The text even speaks of the idols as 'the works of their own hands.' Idolaters who worship their own gods remind me of people who try to sustain themselves by eating their own faeces and drinking their own urine, there is no nourishment in what we produce. We cannot take the philosophical arguments of those who reject God for their own versions of the truth seriously. If you see a person who does an act that deliberately hurts their loved ones, or someone who sins damaging their health for instant gratification, then you can know that they are afflicted with sin madness and their bias against God is not the result of truth but bias. Look at the text these people went on with their murders, their sorceries, their sexual immorality and their thefts. They did not abandon God because they were perfect intellects who reasoned that the universe denied the existence of a Creator, no they refused to give up the self-enthroned life of pleasure and control because they preferred sin to God, and lies to truth.

C.S. Lewis was someone who realised that his arguments against God were built on sand. He reasoned that the existence of evil denied the existence of God until it dawned on him that he could only be angry at evil if there was an objective definition for evil. If God did not exist, then evil did not exist and if he were consistent no atheist could actually subject the data of what we call evil by categories, for they should be bald data with no intrinsic value. He realised that the existence of evil and injustice made the existence of God more likely not less likely. In other words he was borrowing capital from Christianity to refute it, this is called cognitive dissonance or in the terms of 1984, 'doublethink'. 'The power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient, and then, when it becomes necessary again, to draw it back from oblivion for just as long as it is needed, to deny the existence of objective reality and all the while to take account of the reality which one denies – all this is indispensably necessary.'¹

The reason why so many people do not believe in the face of suffering is not because it is untenable that God can exist while evil exists, but more a case of our unwillingness to acknowledge God and to continue on in our blindness.

Idolatry

The ongoing signs of being under the influence of our sins, of being handed over to ourselves in the text is that those who refuse to repent continue to serve the demon idols that have tormented them. There is a great irony here. We make idols in order to control them, to manipulate them and get them to do things for us. However, we see the tables are turned and those gods created by their own hands to serve them end up ruling and enslaving them. The second great irony is that as Beale puts it, we end up resembling that which we revere. We are told in v 20 that idols cannot see, hear or walk, and this is exactly what becomes of those who follow idols, they become spiritually deaf, blind and paralysed.

1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doublethink>

Israel when they were in sin and following idols had ears but did not hear, and eyes but could not see, this is the same thing being described. We are either being conformed to a distorted image of nature, or the image of Christ. If we worship God in Christ we become more like Him who we worship. We will grow in our sight, our hearing and our obedience. This path of what we worship will also determine where we will finally end up. If we worship Christ we will be glorified and rewarded with Him, but if we turn to the demons behind our idols we will be humiliated and burn with them. We are all worshippers, the question is not whether we will worship but what we worship.

At the heart of all sin is idolatry, we place ourselves and our desires before God. As Luther put it, we always break the first commandment every time we sin. Our text tells us that mankind will not repent of their idolatry. In the west we are seeing many people turn away from the traditional religions and idols to new consumer, branded, celebrity pioneered ones, but we are also seeing many people becoming non-religious. There is an increase in secular materialism and a decrease in religion. This does not matter, there is still the same amount of idolatry, for idolatry is a matter of the heart not only a matter of worshipping an actual image. This is why James says, 4:4, 'You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.' Friendship with the world is seen as spiritual adultery, a common motif used to speak about Israel's idolatry in the OT. One of the ways in which the idolatry is the same even though there is no formal religion involved is in the fact that the creation replaces the Creator. In formal idolatry there is wood, stone, gold and silver set up as a god, in secular materialism, it is creation in the form of lust, drunkenness, drugs, and greed. Paul condemns this form of idolatry in Col. 3:5, 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.'

We have been created as creatures of worship, either we are worshipping God or something else, but everyone is a worshipper. There may be those who worship drink and then give it up, but idols are only ever changed never abandoned, so drink may be given up for health and a great body, or for a woman, or to make one more successful at work.

This the traditional way of speaking about the sin of idolatry, however there is a new way in which idolatry is being redefined. Some people are attempting to reach this new post-modern generation with new teachings because the old ones offend. It is taught that we can no longer speak to the 21st century western person about sin in terms of breaking rules but rather we should look at idolatry as a way of speaking about sin. The trouble is what we have said so far is not all that they say. Instead they talk about idolatry being a self-harming practice, and by this they move the emphasis of sin away from something that is against God to something which is primarily against ourselves. It is true that sin is against ourselves but we should not be replacing sin as a violation of God's law and putting in the primary place sin as a way of self-harming. Modern redefinitions of idolatry talk about making good things ultimate things so that imbalance and not rebellion is the impression left. This appeal to a person's sense of self-preservation fits right into the therapeutic culture of our time as well as panders to a consumer mindset.

When we talk about sin today, we need to stress that sin is a terribly grievous thing not because we have not been clever enough not to do ourselves harm but because we have committed high treason. We have rejected the one who has the right to rule over us, the one who is infinitely holy and who deserves our praise both for who He is and for what He does. It is better to die in resisting sin than to sin willingly against Him, for He is indeed more infinitely worthy of our obedience than our sinful passions. Every sin is a direct affront and a denial of the one who causes anything to be. Sin charges God with not being enough, not providing enough, not allowing enough, not being good, wise, generous and kind. Idolatry is a lie which credits all God's work to something that cannot produce anything, to give glory to the demon that lies behind the lie, to pretend that this empty thing is worthy and God is not. This is the highest form of insult.

The text unites worship gone sinful with behaviour going sinful. If our hearts are not loving and worshipping God we will then abuse ourselves and sin. Godlessness leads to immorality. Here then is the vicious cycle that we began with. We take idols instead of God and He gives us what we want and we go on headlong into self-destructive sins. We become addicted and gladly and willingly blind to our self-destruction and slavery. Godlessness results in immorality. As we end this section where man has the most reasonable case for faith and yet continues to endure in idolatry we must urge sinners to repent of their folly. To not repent is folly for it ends with Hell, to worship idols is folly because they are lies, idolatry is the highest insult and sin against God, and the unbelief that rejects God in the face of evil as well as the immoral life that we are addicted to that we gladly choose over God, these are traps and dangerous places to be, places God puts people when He is judging them, flee these traps and turn back to God through faith and repentance.