

The Attributes of God: The Faithfulness of God

Deut 7:1-11

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May 13, 2012

My friend and I were sitting at Starbucks across the street when he said to me “The whole problem with Christianity is that it is absolutely full of contradictions.” These are the passionate words of a university-educated man who feels intellectually forced to be an atheist because of the attributes of God.

He then said “You believe in a God of love and yet your God sanctioned the brutal killing of entire nations of men, women and children how could this God possibly be consistent with a God of love?”

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Today, as we continue our series on the attributes of God, we are looking specifically at God’s faithfulness, we are going to consider one of those difficult texts that my friend referred to.

[Please join me in prayer as we dedicate this time to the Lord]

Please turn with me to Deuteronomy chapter seven. Page 131 in your pew Bibles. As you turn there I would also invite you also to check the back of the prayer insert in your bulletin for a sermon outline. A few people have mentioned that in this series I have moved pretty quickly and it has been difficult to follow – so I hope this helps.

Our thesis today is as follows:

God the Faithful is unchanging in His demand for His people to radically oppose evil.

We are going to start with one verse from our text today and then go back to read the rest of it as we go along. So please look with me at verse 9.

[Read Deut 7:9]

1.) God the Faithful.

When I think of faithfulness a few other words pop immediately into my mind. I think of loyal employees who work faithfully. I think of marriage and the covenant of faithfulness that I have entered into. And I think of faithful Canuck fans that have supported their team through 42 seasons of consecutive losses.

Faithfulness then is the unchanging, unwavering, firm keeping of promises and fulfilling of duties. It’s quite a word!

And verse nine of our text unpacks that definition. It starts by affirming that God is God.

Last week we touched on the holiness of God and we said that by saying God is God we have really said everything. Because God is holy and totally separate from us, there is nothing we can compare Him to. And that is the foundation of this verse, but then it goes on to connect another word with God – Faithfulness.

In fact, God actually takes Faithfulness as part of His name. The Hebrew “*El HaNe'eman*” literally means God the Faithful. And then the rest of verse nine tells us what that means.

It says He keeps His covenant of love, or some other translations say His covenant and His loving-kindness to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands.

God doesn't break His promises, He is loyal to His word. His love is long-suffering and He does this to the thousandth generation.

Now this is good news right! God promises 1000 generations of faithfulness.

Now I can tell you that a 1000 generations is 20,000 years if a generation is 20 years.

But of course that kind of math is crazy. The thousand generations in this verse similar to the thousand years we talked about last week and really means forever. God is never going to break His faithfulness.

How can God make such a long term commitment to a humanity as fickle and sinful as us?

The answer to this comes from the fact that God's faithfulness doesn't have anything to do with us at all; it is solely dependant on Him and His character. We reap the benefit of His faithfulness to Himself.

And of course the ultimate benefit we receive from His faithfulness is our salvation through the person of Jesus Christ. In the beginning God created us because He wanted to share the perfect community He had with Himself – Father, Son and Spirit – with us, and when we sinned and broke that community, in faithfulness to Himself and His desires He sent Jesus to have the final word on sin.

Just like 2 Timothy 2:13 says “[Even] if we are faithless He will remain faithful for He cannot disown Himself.” God is God, He is “*El HaNe'eman*”, God the Faithful.

And here we get to the next word in our thesis:

2.) God the Faithful is unchanging...

To be faithful means to be unchanging, but what about my friend's comments that the God of the Old Testament isn't anything like the God of the New Testament? Is there any truth to his claims?

At first it seems there is, but let's look at the text for ourselves.

Just as a point of context as we get into this. The book of Deuteronomy is a sermon that Moses preached just as the Israelites were finishing their 40 years in the desert. His sermon was an appeal for them to be obedient and faithful in response to God as they left the desert behind and entered the Promised Land.

[Read Deut 7:1-11]

I don't know if you noticed, but there is a lot of destroying that goes on in this text.

And actually in verse two where the text says "you must destroy them totally." The Hebrew there literally says "you must destroy to destroy them." And in case total destruction wasn't enough God goes on. Don't have anything to do with them whatsoever. Don't make any treaties; don't intermarry with them either with their daughters or their sons. In fact don't show any mercy towards them at all. Destroy to destroy!!

Wow! It isn't hard to see why this text doesn't get preached all that often.

The words of my friend ring in my ears "the God of the New Testament isn't anything like the God of the Old Testament."

Is he right? What do we do about texts like this one where God seems nothing like the God we know? Has God changed? Is it possible for the God of Love we know to be faithful to who He is and yet sometimes burn with merciless anger like He here?

Do you see the problem here folks? Don't let anyone tell you this is an easy question, because it isn't. This is one of the major arguments atheists use to show that Christianity is totally unsound, and it convinces many people.

If they are right that God has changed from the Old Testament to the New Testament, then they are also right that the God of the Bible is unstable, illogical and not worthy of worship.

You guys all look a bit depressed. You don't have to be. The Christian response to this scathing argument is that in fact God hasn't changed. And it is very possible for God to appear both merciful and merciless to us, or full of love and full of judgment at the same time because He is being faithful to a higher standard that when we understand it, all His seeming contradictions show themselves not to be contradictions at all.

And God's standard is not arbitrary or random; it is the highest and holiest standard in the universe.

So what is this standard? It is God Himself, God and His character is the standard. But if we are going to understand how He can be His own standard and bring these seeming contradictions together we need to know who He is – because the puny god the world imagines Him to be isn't going to cut it.

So who is He?

Verse nine tells us. He is the Faithful God. He is the God who doesn't change. He keeps His covenant of love to a thousand generations.

Now sometimes people tell me that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath while the God of the New Testament is a God of Love. In fact this misconception comes from not understanding something theologians call the "Progressive Revelation" of God.

Progressive means "growing", and the basic idea here is that in the Old Testament we get a partial picture of who God is and then in the New Testament we get a much more complete picture of who God is. The big picture includes the partial picture, but gives more detail and more information.

About a month ago I received an email about a guy who drove his truck off the highway. Here's the picture. He broke through the guard rail and flipped his truck end over end overtop a culvert opening. He was lucky. Probably some of you have seen this.

But a second picture shows just how lucky he was.

This is an example of progressive revelation. The first picture is accurate, but it only tells part of the story.

So let's consider a couple of God's attributes.

Take His Loving Kindness that is used to describe Him in verse nine of our text today. We actually see this side of God pictured in several places throughout the Old Testament¹ like in Psalms 108:4. It reads "For Your loving kindness is great above the heavens, And Your faithfulness *reaches* to the skies."

This is an Old Testament picture of God's love but we don't get a full picture of His loving kindness until we read John 3:16 that says "God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him would not perish but have eternal life". The picture of God's loving kindness in the Old Testament only hints at the full picture that lies ahead.

¹ See Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Deuteronomy 4:31; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:5, 108:4; 145:8; Joel 2:13 for example

Or take the way God deals with Israel as a parent deals with a child. When they willfully sinned against Him and worshipped idols, God punished them. But when they repented, He forgave and delivered them.

We get the same picture in the New Testament. Hebrews 12:6 tells us that “the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.”

So God has not changed it is just that what He has shown us about Himself has increased. – He is still the Faithful unchanging God, and we have His word on this.

And this leads us to the last section of our thesis... Because God is faithful, the heart of what He called Israel to thousands of years ago still applies to us today.

3.) God the Faithful is unchanging in His demand for His people to radically oppose evil.

Look again at verse 2. It says make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. These are hard words, these are radical words. But if God is unchanging then somehow the heart of his radical demand for His people to oppose and dispose of evil must be the same in the New Testament as it is in the Old.

So what is at the heart of what God is calling His people to here?

Verse four through six give us the answer. Why does God demand this radical action?

[Read Deut 7:4-6]

God calls Israel to utterly dispose of their neighbours because (verse six) Israel is a holy people, which means a set apart people, a people dedicated to God alone; they are the people that God chose for Himself and He can not allow them to prostitute themselves before other gods. And Israel must take every extreme effort to ensure they stay true to God.

And for Israel this meant killing off the nations of idol worshippers beside them.

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If you know the story of Israel you know how realistic God's concern was. As it happened Israel failed to get rid of their neighbours, and their neighbours did lead them away from YHWH into idolatry.

So at the heart of God's message to Israel was a call to get rid of the possibility for being led into idolatry. That is what means for God to be faithful to Himself – He will not allow His people to be idolatrous.

Now here I need to bring you to another point of context, because in our day and age killing seven nations in order to help one nation steer clear of idolatry seems insane. And indeed nowhere in the New Testament is killing people sanctioned as a way to get rid of evil.

But these were not New Testament times, and what God calls Israel to here fit well with their worldview and the world views of their neighbours.

You might not like this but here is what I mean: In Old Testament times people thought of themselves in general as a group, a nation or a family, not as individuals.

For example, the hearts of the kings determined the hearts of the people. Consider King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29:

Hezekiah was twenty-five years old when he became king....²He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD.... Hezekiah gave the order to sacrifice the burnt offering on the altar.... [and] the **whole** assembly bowed in worship.... Hezekiah and **all** the people rejoiced at what God had brought about for his people."²

Hezekiah was righteous and as a result the whole nation of Israel was righteous along with him. Back then the nation thought of itself as one person.

This was true for evil kings as well. Listen to these accounts:

In the third year of Asa king of Judah, Baasha... became king of all Israel... and he reigned twenty-four years. He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the ways of [evil king] Jeroboam and committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit. (1 Ki 15:33-34)

There is a one to one relationship between the sins the king committed and sins Israel committed. One more example:

But [King] Omri did evil in the eyes of the LORD and sinned more than all those before him. He followed completely the ways of Jeroboam son of Nebat, committing the same sin Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit, so that they aroused the anger of the LORD, the God of Israel, by their worthless idols. (1 Ki 16:25-26)

And you can see the same pattern dozens of times throughout the Old Testament. If the King was good then the nation as a whole repented and came back to God, but if the king was evil then the whole nation rebelled.

² 2 Chr 29:1-2;27;36

Israel, like all Middle Eastern nations of the day viewed themselves like families. And God related to them the way they saw themselves. There are a few examples where this isn't the case but in general this is the way it was.³

And it is in this light that God called for the destruction of these nations, because, verse five tells us, they were full of idolatry. These nations were bent on serving and giving glory to other gods – and idolatry is the number one sin in the Bible; YHWH will not share His glory with another.

Radical evil required radical action.

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So... how do we apply this in the 21st century?

Here's the key: Because God now lives within each of us, in the New Testament the emphasis switched from the Nation of Israel as the people of God, to the Christian and the Church as the people of God. And so as we look for how the New Testament calls us to radically resist idolatry that distinction is going to be clear.

And there are lots of texts I could choose from here. I'll just bring two of them to your attention. The first one comes from Jesus in Mark 9. Here Jesus tells us how we are to oppose evil. He says:

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into Hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into Hell."⁴

Now Jesus isn't in favor of us mutilating our bodies– after all we all know that it is just as possible to sin with one hand as it is with two, but Jesus' point is go to every extreme to pursue holiness because the consequences are severe. Don't let anything get in the way, radically oppose evil at every opportunity. But the evil Jesus calls us to oppose is not in our neighbours, it is in ourselves.

The second text comes from the Apostle Peter who actually quotes from Deuteronomy 7:6 – the text we are focusing on today – and shows how Christians are the new chosen people and are therefore responsible for undertaking the same radical opposition of evil that Israel was called to.

³ 1 Kings 18:22 (Elijah claims he is the only one left who serves the Lord out of the Nation of Israel). Gen 18:16-33 (Abraham appeals to save Sodom if there are 50 righteous people in it)

⁴ Mark 9:43-47

1 Peter 2:9-12 says “But you [Christians] are *a chosen people*, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light... Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.” (1 Peter 2:9-12)

Notice the two reasons from Peter’s text why God chose us to be His people: First “that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.” He chose us so that we could bring Him glory. The same reason He chose Israel.

It’s the same reason He created people in the first place. We exist to bring God glory.

And second Peter says, “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us.” God chose us to be His people so that the people around us would be drawn towards Him.

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In the Spring Pastor Lyle and Myself did a series through 1st Corinthians talking about the Missional Church and the task God has given us of being a light in our neighbourhoods. That is why God chose us; this is exactly what Peter is talking about in this text. We must live in a way so that the people around us are drawn to God.

So how can we be a light, bringing glory to the God of Faithfulness in our neighbourhoods and in our city?

We can do that, these text tell us by looking like the faithful God, by being the holy nation, the chosen people we were create, redeemed and then called to be – we can be a people who radically oppose evil at every opportunity.

As we draw to a close I want to look at what it practically means for us to radically oppose evil and idolatry today?

I mean idols look different to us than they did in Israel’s day. Back then idolatry was about the nations as a whole bowing down before wooden and metal statues of other gods. Today we live in a world of intellectualism and materialism, a world where statues of gods are not respected but idolatry is just as real – In North America we worship ourselves. And because idolatry looks so different today the way we fight against it will also be very different than the way Israel fought thousands of years ago – but the battle is just as real. Today this battle is a battle of money and truth.

And I want to just bring out two quick examples of what it might look like to radically oppose idolatry in our culture. First, is in the area of money and the second is in the area of truth. Both are completely counter-cultural and are equivalent to Israel having to destroy to destroy their idol infested neighbours.

First money. I am convinced that the idolatry of money is exposed for what it is by how much we keep in comparison to how much we give. Ask yourself “how much of your money do you spend on yourself?” Over the years as your income grew did your lifestyle change as well? Or did the increase of your wealth enable you to help more people.⁵

Without getting into this in too much depth consider Ephesians 4:28 which says “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need.”

Notice the three levels of how to live with money that this text describes. The first category of people steal to get, the second work to get and the third work to give away.

Now very few members of Baptist Churches fit into category one. We are a hard working people, but lots of us fit into category two and I find myself here a lot of the time. Why? Because this is where our culture encourages us to be. It says the goal of work is money and the goal of money is more comfort, more security and more toys for me. But friends, this is idolatry. If we spend our energy and our money on ourselves then we prove that we are god in our lives.

The holiness and faithfulness of God calls us to level three. The money we have is not only for ourselves, it is for the purpose of *sharing* with those who are in need. Now this doesn't mean we must impoverish ourselves to give to others – that's not what the Bible is saying here. We work to take care of our needs, but then we give the rest away. The question for us is really what do we need?

We live in a nation of incredible wealth. Do you know that 54% of the people in the world live on the equivalent of \$2 a day? That's nothing! Do you know that your pastor makes 100 times more than that! Friends we are incredibly wealthy, and with that wealth comes great risk of idolatry.

Pray about this – ask God “what do I really need and what more could I give away in order to radically oppose the idolatry of materialism in my life?”

The second area where our culture is idolatrous is in the area of intellect which shows itself in our view of truth. Our culture idolizes relativism – that means Canadians hold that if you believe that what you believe is true, you are arrogant and anti-intellectual. Friends, this is idolatrous.

1 John 5:12 tells us “whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” This is what we believe folks, whether our culture believes it or not. And because this is true it is loving for us to tell the people in our lives the truth regardless of how they respond.

⁵ Thought taken from John Piper's “Brothers we are Not Professionals” (pg 171-2)

Now this is particularly difficult at universities and high-schools because these are places where pluralism and relativism are very powerful idols. But if we are to bare the name of Christ we must stand up against this evil and speak the truth.

Now I need to add a word of caution here too. This doesn't mean stand out on the street corner and yell angrily at people telling them they are going to hell. That's not going to accomplish anything, but do build friendships with non-believers and when you have earned the right to speak into their lives tell them that you want them to go to Heaven and there is only one way.

On April 14th, 1912, with icebergs all around the Titanic's radio operator received the first of at least four warnings about the path ahead. At 11:40pm, just one hour before the Titanic's fateful moment a ship called "The Californian" only thirty kilometers away from the Titanic sent this message "We are stopped and surrounded by ice."

The Titanic's response, and I quote "shut up, I'm busy."⁶ Whatever that operator was busy doing it wasn't near as important as The Californian's message of truth.

In the same way we hold a message the entire world needs. There is ice all around and you are going to sink. Friends, these two areas area places where we are called to radically oppose the idolatry of our culture – by giving our money away and telling our friends the truth.

God the Faithful is unchanging is in his demand that His people radically oppose evil.

⁶ <http://adventure.howstuffworks.com/titanic5.htm>