



Respectable Sins: Ungodliness

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The Old Testament prophet Joel, looked at the fallen nation of Israel and asked, “Why should they say among the people, ‘Where is their God?’” You see, God’s election to salvation is always for a purpose. As the Westminster Catechism says: the chief end of man is the glorification of God. When he chose and redeemed Israel it was so that his people would be a witness for him – they were called to be a divine light to the Gentile nations around them – a light that shone in the darkness. And yet God’s people stumbled and fell. They failed to be the witness they were called to be, and looking at them the nations asked, “Where is their God?” Israel was living for herself, as if she had no god.

But ungodliness wasn’t just the problem of the Old Testament Church – it’s the problem of the New Testament Church too. We’re all guilty of ungodliness to some extent, and it’s this sin that’s at the root of all the other sins we struggle with.

This is one of those sins that we’re often prone to overlook. After all, when you think of ungodliness, you probably think of atheists or the truly “wicked” people out there. We’re Christians. We can’t be ungodly! And yet we’re all guilty here. St. Paul writes in Romans 1:18: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.” Do you see how he makes a distinction between ungodliness and unrighteousness? Unrighteousness describes sinful actions in our thoughts, words, and deeds, but ungodliness describes an attitude toward God. An atheist is the epitome of ungodliness – he doesn’t even believe God exists – but that same atheist could very easily be an otherwise morally “decent” person – at least as the world sees it. As Christians we should be motivated to good works by love of God, but there are a lot of selfish and ungodly motives that can move us to do the right thing, like staying out of trouble with the law or the pride that comes from knowing others look to you as an upstanding person.

Ungodliness is really living your everyday life with little or no thought for God, his will, his glory, or your own dependence on him. I think if you understand that, you can see how someone can lead a more or less respectable life and still be ungodly in the sense that God is pretty much irrelevant to them. Of course an atheist is going to live as if God is irrelevant to him – he doesn’t believe God exists – but think about the definition I just gave and think about how you live your own life.

The sad fact of the matter is that we Christians often tend to live our daily lives with little more thought for God than our atheist friends. Maybe we read our Bibles and have some prayer time each morning, but when we put our Bibles away and head out to start the day we basically live out our lives as if God doesn’t care or doesn’t exist. We might go for hours without ever even thinking about him. What’s the difference between us and our atheist neighbour? God isn’t in his thoughts at all and is seldom in ours.

The New Testament is really convicting when it comes to our ungodliness. I said that it’s often the case that we seldom think about just how dependent on God we are. Look at what St. James writes in his epistle:

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” – yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” (James 4:13-15)

James’ issue with these people wasn’t in their making plans. What he condemns here is that they don’t acknowledge God in their planning. They don’t acknowledge their dependence on him. Think about your own life. How often do you make plans – plans for big things and plans for small mundane things – without included God or thinking about your dependence on him.

When I met one of my good friends a number of years ago, one thing that struck me was that he was always finishing his sentences saying, “Lord willing.” I’d say, “See you next Sunday,” and he’d say, “Yep! Lord willing.” I’d ask if he was

still planning to take a trip that he’d told me about and he’d say, “Yep! Lord willing.” It was like that with everything: “Yep! Lord willing.” And then not long after that I discovered the English Puritans and started avidly reading the books written by those great saints. And suddenly I understood the whole “Lord willing” thing. You see, the Puritans understood Providence. They understood the sovereignty of God. They understood their utter and total dependence on God. (They understood that because they, perhaps better than anyone before or since, understood the concept of grace.) And so I started to understand just how much they saw God at work in their daily lives and just how much I didn’t. To live our lives with little or no thought for God’s sovereign activity in even the small things is to be guilty of the sin of ungodliness.

I think that similarly we’re also often guilty of not thinking about our accountability to God and our responsibility to live according to his moral will as Scripture shows it to us. It’s not so much that we live blatantly sinful lives; it’s just that we seldom think about God’s will, and for the most part are content simply to avoid gross and obvious sins. But look at what St. Paul wrote to the Colossians:

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10)

That’s a God-centred prayer if there ever was one. St. Paul wanted the Colossians to be full of the knowledge of God’s will for them. He wanted them to live lives worthy of God and that were pleasing to him. That’s what God-centred prayer is all about. Paul’s great desire was that they be a godly people.

Now compare that prayer for the Colossians to your own prayers for yourself, for your family, and your friends. Do your prayers show that same concern for God’s will and for God’s glory? Do they show a desire that your life be pleasing to God? I think that sometimes we hit the mark, but an awful lot of the time the focus of our prayers is on a litany of temporal needs. God does

tell us to bring even our smallest concerns before him, but we also need to be careful lest we start to pray as if he's some kind of genie. Too often we come to God with the attitude of "my will be done," when Jesus tells us to pray to the Father saying, "Thy will be done."

When it comes to our lives, St. Paul doesn't cut us any slack. His clear exhortation is that we live our lives before the face of God. If there was anyone in an unjust and unfair position in the ancient world, it was the slaves. They made up a huge part of the population. And we know that a lot of the members of the Colossian church were slaves. Look at what Paul writes to them:

Slaves obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eyeservice, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving Christ. (Colossians 3:22-24).

If anyone had a right to be unhappy and unfulfilled in their jobs, it was these folks. If any could be justified in doing their work in half-hearted way, it was them. And yet St. Paul tells them to faithfully serve their masters as unto the Lord. None of us is that bad off, but the same principle applies to us in the context of our vocations and professions. But how many of us approach our work with this principle in mind. To understand this, it took my getting fired from a good and well-paying job. I ended up having to take a \$4.85 minimum wage job watering and dead-heading plants in a retail garden centre, and one day as I was grumbling about it I realised this was what Paul was talking about. God is sovereign. He puts us where we're at, and if he puts us there, then we need to do the work he's called us to do, no matter how unpleasant or menial it may seem and no matter what the earthly compensation is. The next day a coworker asked me why I was suddenly so happy. God gave an opportunity to say, "I just realised that no job stinks if you're doing it for God!"

But God wants more than just our jobs. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1

Corinthians 10:31). Eating and drinking are about as mundane as it gets, but that's Paul's point: do *all* – everything – to the glory of God. That means that in everything we do, our desire should be first to please God, and second, that all our activities will give honour to God before other people. Just like Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The mark of a godly man or woman is that they do everything, from the moment they wake up until the moment they fall asleep, to the glory of God.

In contrast Paul blasted the self-righteous Jews in Rome when he wrote, "You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law. For, as it is written, 'The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'" (Romans 2:23-24). Those are strong words. Paul's saying that if we claim to follow God and yet fail to obey his law, we're guilty of blasphemy. We're supposed to live in such a way that we draw people to God, but our ungodliness ultimately drives people away from God.

But so far I've been talking mostly about how we relate to the world. How about how we related to God? Our godliness or ungodliness can be measured, more than anything else, by our desire to develop an intimate relationship with God. David wrote in Psalm 42, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God?" (42:1-2). The Psalms are full of this sort of desire for closeness to God. In Psalm 63:1, David writes of his thirsting for God and earnest seeking of him. In Psalm 27:4 he expresses his desire to leave the world behind, only wanting more than anything else to dwell in the presence of the Lord and gaze on his beauty. These are the expressions of a godly man, and yet how many of us can honestly say that this is what we *truly* desire more than anything else?

For the godly person, God is the very centre and focus of life. Every circumstance, no matter how big or small, whether it's earthly or spiritual, is viewed through the lens of this God-centredness. But we can only develop that kind of God-

centredness in the context of an ever-growing intimate relationship with him. There's no way anyone can genuinely desire to please God or glorify him without that kind of relationship.

Each of us falls somewhere on the spectrum between godliness and ungodliness. We need to ask ourselves where we are on that spectrum. Jesus was the only person ever to live a completely godly life. We're not talking about righteous versus unrighteous living, we're talking about living our life as if God is relevant or irrelevant. The sad thing is that survey after survey shows us that there's not much difference between the way Christians and non-Christians live their lives. It's a sad state and it exists because we give so little thought to God and how we can please and glorify him.

I really do think that this is what lies at the root of so many of our other sins. Pride lies behind a lot of sins, but how much would it curb our pride to live each day with the awareness that all we are, all we accomplish, and all we have comes by the grace of God? How many other sins would we put an end to if we lived our lives with the constant understanding that we live them before the face of God? Look at the big oaks right outside our windows here. Sin, like those branches, is rooted in a big trunk that supports them. And that trunk might be the sin of pride, but the trunk can't stand without a big root system. Ungodliness is the root system that feeds our pride and all our other sins.

So how can we deal with ungodliness in our lives? St. Paul wrote to Timothy, telling him, "Train yourself for godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7). The word *train* comes from the athletic culture of the Greek world and refers to the rigours of the athletes in their contests. It carries with it the ideas of commitment, consistency, and disciplined training.

You see, St. Paul wanted Timothy – and all of us – to be totally committed to godliness – to be committed to it the same way that a trained runner is committed to his temporal prize. He wrote to the Corinthians and to Timothy describing the Christian life in relation to a foot race. You don't run in a competition without running for the prize. We need to run the course of the Christian life in the same way. But I don't think that a lot of

Christians really ever think about how they can grow in godliness.

name of our blessed redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We're committed to all sorts of things, but not often to this. When the new Ikea opened in Portland last year, there were people who camped out for a *week* in anticipation of the opening. I kid you not! A *week*. There were so many people waiting in line overnight on that last night before the store opened that the parking lot was actually full! Imagine that kind of zeal and devotion just for another big-box store. Now the question is, would any of us have anything close to that kind of zeal for godliness?

The goal in our pursuit of godliness should be to grow more in the awareness that every moment of our lives is lived in the presence of God; that we're responsible to him and dependent on him. If we're striving for that goal we should be growing in our desire to please and glorify him, even in the most ordinary things we do.

Each of us needs to ask, "What would I do differently if I were seeking to do all to the glory of God?" Ungodliness is all-encompassing, so we need to look at specific areas of our lives where we tend to live without regard to God. Is it your work, your hobbies, your playing or watching sports, your entertainment choices, what you do on the internet or when you're driving or shopping?

Take some time to meditate on and pray over some of the Scripture passages that I've given here tonight. And above all, pray that God will make you more conscious of the fact that you live every moment of every day under his all-seeing gaze. You may not be mindful of him, but he's certainly aware of you and sees every deed you do, hears every word you say, and knows every thought you think. Even beyond that, he even knows every motive. Let us then seek to be as mindful of him as his is of us.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, you have created us for yourself and for your glory. Remind us of this each day, when we're so tempted to live our lives for ourselves and for our own glory. Plant a desire for you deep in our hearts and make it our instinct to seek you in all we do and say and think. Give us a soul-thirst for you, our living God, we ask in the