

March 16, 2012 – Tough Questions

Why is the God of the Christian Bible So Intolerant of Other Faiths?

Hey, Tim Perry here – pastor of Spiritual Discovery at Christ Community Church. Coming at you with Week 11 of *Tough Questions*.

Well, today's reading in the chronological Bible finds Joshua at the very end of his experience with the Israelites. His farewell speech reads like this: *"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the river and in Egypt and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourself this day whom you will serve – whether the gods of your forefathers that they served beyond the river or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."*

Listen to the response of the people: *"Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods. It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt from the land of slavery and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among the nations through which we traveled. And the LORD drove out before us all the nations including the Amorites who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD because He is our God."*

You would think that Joshua would be pretty encouraged by that response, but Joshua still warns them – he persists. Listen to what he says next: *"You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God, he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you and he has been good to you. But the people said to Joshua – no, we will serve the LORD. Then Joshua said, you are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD. Yes, we are witnesses they replied. Now then said Joshua, throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD. And the people said to Joshua – we will serve the LORD our God and obey him."*

What is at stake in this conversation that Joshua is having with the people of God? Well, what's at stake has to do with religious pluralism and how dangerous religious pluralism is. It was dangerous to the Israelite people back in Joshua's day and I'm going to make the case that it's just as dangerous today.

Well, as it turns out Joshua's warnings were justified. The Israelites didn't clear the Canaanites out of the land and the Israelites picked up the idols and the gods that the Canaanites worshiped. Psalm 106 is written from a vantage point of hundreds of years in the future, and it looks back on these painful days that Joshua is warning the Israelites about.

Here's what it says: *"They did not destroy the peoples as the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the nations and adopted their customs. They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons."*

(This is why Joshua is cautioning them so severely.)

"They shed innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was desecrated by their blood. They defiled themselves by what they did; by their deeds they prostituted themselves."

So here's why God detests idol worship. Here's why God will tolerate no rivals. Well, I want to take a minute with you and flush that out a little more. Why is it that God will not tolerate any other idols? Why is it that the Christian faith is pretty intolerant of other faiths if it's going to be true to itself?

Well I've thought of six reasons why God hates idol worship. Let's take a look at them on this piece of paper together with me. Let's go over here.

In answering the question about why is the God of the Bible so intolerant of other faiths, I want us to look at this list right here:

I've defined a term here called MMRP: Man-Made Religious Pluralism. What I mean by "man-made religious pluralism" is anything that stems from a human origin of making up a religion – either through idolatry or through some philosophy of religious life that alternatively explains where people come from, who God is, what he is like, how our world got here and what as human beings we are accountable to God for.

So here are six reasons why the God of the Bible is so adamant about being the only God there is. There are no others. Anytime men or people come along and try to invent their own script, God gets upset and here's why.

First of all man-made religious pluralism is not **"true"**! It doesn't mean there are no elements of truth in world religions or sectarianism groups or even cult-like groups or philosophies, but as a complete description of our world of who God is and what mankind's need is – man-made sources to explain all that, don't lead us to the truth.

Second, man-made pluralism doesn't **"work"**. It doesn't accomplish what God's plan accomplishes. It doesn't successfully explain where we come from. It doesn't represent who God is accurately. It doesn't ultimately provide for forgiveness of sin or a restored relationship with God. So man-made religion parts ways with God and who he is about.

Thirdly, ultimately – man-made religion **"leads people away"** from God – not toward God. You can see that in the history of cults and sectarian groups that the center of attention becomes the charismatic leader himself – not God - or it leads towards a cultural identity – not a theological identity or religious movements that begin to focus on money and power and control – or religious movements and man-made philosophies that aren't centered around the truth of who God is.

One natural result of that is reason Number Four – God hates man-made religious pluralism because **"lives are damaged by it"**. The Israelites blundered on into this when they adopted some of the practices of the people in the land of Canaan – even to the point of sacrificing their own children – burning their children alive. There are much less drastic examples of that, but every example of man-made religion eventually leads to some form of abuse and damage.

Number Five – God dislikes man-made religious pluralism because he has his own **"plan"** for diversity and **"inclusion"**. Christianity today is known the world over in virtually every major cultural grouping on the planet. Christianity can be believed by any people group and has been adapted and accepted by people of all different kinds of cultural expressions. The vision that we have of the Kingdom of God in the Book of Revelation is one that's inclusive of every people group, every tongue, every tribe, every language group will be represented in God's redeemed humanity some day. God has no problem with diversity. God is pro-diversity – God is pro-inclusion, but in order for God to be that way, he has to insist on the integrity of His own plan. He doesn't need a man-made source of pluralism or pluralistic options that we come up with.

Lastly, for all five of these reasons and probably others – man-made pluralism **“angers”** God and evokes his **“judgment”**. God just can’t stand still and look at a picture of humanity that is going down the tubes. God is angry over these things. He is angry over it in the Old Testament. He also is angry over it in the New Testament and today because so much of what people have added to the formula of how we know God and find fulfillment in life, doesn’t actually accomplish that at all. It reflects a mistrust of a single, solitary truthful source of moral truth and of ultimate truth and reality. It reflects our own rebellion and our wrong attitude toward God.

It’s a weighty list of things that we bring before God when we step away from his plan. He’s not delighted by it. He doesn’t celebrate our own contrived forms of pluralism. So pluralism – like what we read about in the Book of Joshua – like what we’re going to read about in other parts of the Old Testament and the New Testament – is not something that God approves of or designs. But it’s not because God doesn’t have a plan to include every people.

So the choice is really up to us. The ball is in our court. Will we do pluralism and diversity God’s way – or will we keep trying to do it our way?

Well, today we’re in a very similar situation as Joshua was. We’re surrounded by gods – we’re surrounded by man-made expressions of religious pluralism all over the place. The choice - just like with Israel – is ours today. Are we going to dive in and borrow from some man-made form – some worldview concocted by humanity or are we going to trust God and what God says is true? Well, you need to test that out in your life and your experiences. Some of us who call ourselves Christians actually do struggle with gods all around us. Gods of materialism, gods of success and power, but the challenge for us today is can we do like what Joshua told us to do? Can we worship and serve the Lord only because we’re convinced of his goodness and we’re aware of how He has saved us – that He alone is the only source of salvation?

Well, if you’ve got a comment or two – hit the “comment” button there and let me know what you think. It’s been great being with you. We’ll see you next on *Tough Questions*.