

## **God vs. Pop-God**

### **Jeremiah 16:19-21**

Theme: The pursuit after other gods and ways to God is a futile endeavor. There is only one God and only one way to follow him.

There is a pop culture in our society that includes music, styles, people—and theology. Today, we're going to contrast our culture's "pop-god" with the true God.

In this passage God rebukes the people for their idolatry—their following after other gods and polluting the land with false gods. We talk about pollution in terms of air quality and water dumping, but God views the infestation in the land with false gods as pollution. The Israelites, as a way to accommodate their neighbors' cultures, and by way of following after the popular trends in those days, began to adopt the worship of foreign gods among them. It wasn't that they denied the existence of Yahweh, or that they rejected his deity. It was that they lumped him together with the worship of other gods also, making him one of many other gods as well.

The Israelites thought that as long as they acknowledged him as one of their gods, that was enough. God wasn't pleased that although the people were worshipping other gods as well, they were at least worshipping him along with their other gods. God had demanded that his people were to worship him alone, no other gods before or beside him.

The consequence of this action was that the people ultimately faced God's judgment, but also the gods they were following were powerless to do anything. They were unsatisfying in that they could not respond and the worship of them was unsatisfying. In another place in Jeremiah, God says, "For my people have done two evil things: They have abandoned me-- the fountain of living water. And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns that can hold no water at all!" So to look for a god other than Yahweh, to follow a path other than worshipping him alone is like forsaking the true fountain of living water, and to attempt to hew out a broken cistern which—let alone producing living water—isn't even able to hold water.

We need to remember that the Israelites were just following the popular customs of that day; they were worshipping the token gods of their neighbors. They were just trying to fit in. The ironic thing is that this assimilation caused them to fall into terrible spiritual danger. In trying to fit in, accommodate, assimilate, adopting the worship of other gods, lumping Yahweh into the same field as other gods, they were essentially rejecting Yahweh as God. God was not content to be one of many gods; he demands to be worshipped alone. He alone is God, and to acknowledge any other god is to forsake him.

God refused to be simply another deity. His consistent testimony concerning himself throughout Scripture is that he alone is one God. No door was left open for the existence or authority of any other god. The people were to acknowledge him alone. And the prescribed worship of him was very clearly spelled out. God made it absolutely clear how the people were to worship him; they weren't to worship him according to the customs of the people around them or according to their own inventions. He alone was God, and he was to be worshipped in the way that he had ordained.

Here's the deal: we live in a time in which the concept of God is generalized to the point that people very commonly use that phrase with a very vague notion attached to it. They talk about God in such a generic way that the term really means nothing at all: it could refer to Santa Claus just as easily as it could the God of the Bible. That could be why there is so little offense with speaking about God in a public way—because it often means nothing at all.

Our society may not be too dissimilar from that of ancient Israel. It's true that we may not explicitly speak of other gods or deities. But when we speak of God, there is often such a vague view of what God really is that we're really not saying anything at all when we speak of him.

Such a vague, generic concept is exactly what God was trying to correct throughout Scripture. He begins by making himself known in a personal way to Abraham. Then, he introduces his name, Yahweh, to Moses. Later, as Moses is leading the Israelites through the wilderness, he requests to see God's face. God doesn't quite grant his request fully, but he does allow Moses to see some manifestation of God's radiance. During this experience God declares the essential definition of his character: And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "*The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.*" That is who the true God is; that is his character. To speak of God in any way that isn't consistent with that is to speak of a different God. Finally, God makes himself known in the most complete way through Jesus Christ, his own Son, who shared in the essence of God, and ultimately appeared as the perfect God-Man, God actually clothed in human skin.

I think the problem that our society has is that we try and make God into a God that we are more comfortable with. We don't feel comfortable talking about God in exclusive terms because that sounds so narrow and bigoted, and often makes us feel marginalized. We may not like the idea of a God who is wrathful against sin, or who is compassionate, gracious, and forgiving. That may not fit our view of what God is supposed to be like. Sometimes I don't understand or like certain aspects of God's character and revelation of himself. It doesn't matter; he is God and he is the God whom he is whether I fully understand or appreciate it or not. God is who he is, and his word describes who he is. My responsibility is to respond to God in the way that he reveals and not in the way I might be disposed.

C.S. Lewis wrote of a prayer before a prayer that should take place before we approach God in prayer. We should pray: Lord, may it be the true you to whom I pray and not a God of my own making, and may it be the true me who prays and not a caricature of whom I would like others to think I am. I claim to be praying to God, but which God am I praying to? A God of my own making? A God fashioned after my image, according to my own inclinations and comfort? Do I recognize God for who he truly is and what he has revealed himself to be?

It also comes down to who I truly view as in control. Do I view God as existing to do my bidding or do I exist to do his will? I love my sons, and I would do anything I could to make them happy. And because God has blessed us as much as he has, we're able to do a lot of fun things; they have everything they need plus we're also able to do special things like go out to eat sometimes or go to the park or buy toys for special occasions. But my sons, as well as we try to teach them, very often express the notion that mine and Kris' purpose in life is to make them happy at all costs: to give to them, to do for them, to play with them. As much as I hate to admit it, my sons' view of me is probably closer to a parental Santa Claus—or even butler!—than that of a dad that they are to respect and obey. In the same way, I wonder

if our view of God stems more from our own inclinations and desires, and from our prevailing culture, than from actual revelation of himself.

This appears very clearly in the popular versions of heaven. I often hear people—even Christians—talk about what heaven will be like. Their concern is often related to what we'll be doing in heaven, whether we'll be having a good time and enjoying ourselves and entertained (after all, what can we possibly be doing for all eternity that will keep us occupied?). You know what I think we'll be doing for all eternity in heaven—Whatever God wants us to be doing! Heaven is about God—what pleases him—that's what makes it heaven. Our role in heaven is to do what pleases him. The problem with this earth is that it's filled with people who do only what they want to do. That's what makes the world as horrible as it is: because it's filled with people who live according to their self-centered desires without regard for the needs of others. But heaven is a place—or a domain—in which God's will is constantly done, which means that all is done for his glory and our good because God acts out of perfect love. John Piper wrote a book several years ago entitled, "Hunger for God." One of the phrases in that book that was especially provocative was that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." I'm not prepared to contradict or argue against that statement directly. But I think a more accurate rendition of it might be that we are most satisfied in God when God is most glorified in us. It brings us the greatest satisfaction in life when we are living according to God's will in our lives. A life of perfect existence will be one in which we are constantly doing God's will.

I think that one of Satan's most effective tactics is that of distraction. That's the classic magician's method. If you can distract someone well enough with meaningless things, he can't see what's really happening. You know, I've heard people—very intelligent people—claim that with so many different religions, you can't really know which one is true, and that they all must be equally valid since from an objective perspective they all look basically the same. When does that work on a multiple choice test? When can you argue that since all the choices look basically the same, they all must be true? To claim that is a cop-out. Anyone who says that really doesn't care about finding the right answer. Especially when it comes to a matter as important and controversial as religion, how is it possible that all the competing gods and views of God are equally valid? That's crazy! Some religions don't even claim to believe in God. How can one say that their path leads to God just as well as the Christian path or the Jewish path or the Muslim path?

As far as how this looks in our culture, I think that the single most common expression of faith is that very generic view of God which considers him a mighty deity, but is benevolent to welcome all into his home (even those who don't really believe he exists, or those who might lump him together with many other gods). Let me say this as a succinct statement of the point I'm trying to get across: the existence of many competing options doesn't invalidate the existence of one right answer. That's true for any field.

I think that the worst danger for the Christian living in a pluralistic culture like this is that she loses sight of the very important distinctive of who our God is and how he has revealed himself—ultimately in Jesus Christ. Our God is not a generic deity; he is not a cosmic and benign Santa Claus; and all roads do not lead to him. He went to great lengths to carefully reveal himself through his written word and through his living Word—his divine Son, the exact representation of his being. If I consider myself a Christian, that is the God to whom I owe my allegiance, and not to another god of my own making or the making of my culture.

What we, in our culture, will hear most often—much more often than that God doesn't exist or that Jesus Christ was a terrible man—is that our God is a generic sort of deity and that any road—as long

as it is sincere—will lead to him. We'll be tempted to dilute our faith into something that is palatable for everyone and offensive to none. That kind of a God is really no God at all.

In my experience there's one type of person that I have the hardest time sharing my faith with: it's the person who adopts this generic sort of view of God. Such a person claims to believe in God—even the Christian God. But this God of their belief is not unique; he is not distinctive. He's the generic brand, the one-size-fits-all. He's the God anyone would be comfortable with. Such a person is much more difficult to communicate the Gospel to than an avowed atheist because they think they know God. The problem is often that they don't know the God of the Gospel, the God who alone demands to be worshipped, the God who justifies and accepts people freely, yet only through his Son, Jesus Christ.