

HALLOWED BE THY NAME

Scriptures: Ezekiel 36:16-28; Ezekiel 6:1-10

I once heard a sermon by a pastor who said he prayed for patience. He realized later what a terrible mistake that was. Over the next week he encountered some of the slowest, most frustrating people he had ever met, people who sorely tried his patience. He concluded by saying, “Be careful what you pray for.”

I think the same advice applies to the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” Do you realize what you are praying for when you say those words? Do you have any idea how dangerous that prayer could be?

Sometimes on Wednesday mornings when I lead a Bible study at the House of Charity, I walk around the dining hall introducing myself to people and inviting them to come. Most of them shake their heads or wave me off, but some of them give me an earful about why they want nothing to do with religion. They tell about being abused by parents who made them go to church or by clergy that they met in church. They tell me about the times they felt judged by other people at church because of their clothes or their teeth or the backpack they were carrying around with them. They tell of trying to get help from a church and being told to go somewhere else. They say, “If that is religion, I want nothing to do with it.”

Occasionally I hear similar stories from people I have gotten to know right here in our own neighborhood. They say to me, “I suppose you are wondering why I don’t go to church.” I haven’t said a word. They just start telling me. They tell me of parents who made them go to church every Sunday and made their lives miserable the rest of the week. They tell me of bad experiences they had in a church and of people in the church who hurt them. They tell me about times when they felt judged and looked down on by other people in the church. They say, “If that is religion, I want nothing to do with it.” In their eyes God is discredited, God’s name is dishonored, by the people who claim to worship him.

Now that is the problem in Ezekiel. In Ezekiel chapter 6, God announces judgment on the people of Israel—verses 5-7:

I will lay the corpses of the people of Israel in front of their idols; and I will scatter your bones around your altars. Wherever you live, your towns shall be waste and your high places ruined, so that your altars will be waste and ruined, your idols broken and destroyed, your incense stands cut down, and your works wiped out. The slain shall fall in your midst; then you shall know that I am the Lord.

Let me focus for a minute on that last phrase: “You shall know that I am the Lord.” That phrase is used 62 times in the book of Ezekiel. It is like a chorus that keeps being repeated. Take a pew Bible and look at Ezekiel 39:7 (OT, p. 808). God says, “My holy name I will make known among my people Israel; and I will not let my holy name be profaned any more; and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, the Holy One in Israel.” When God says, “They shall know that I am the Lord,” it means “They shall know that my name is holy.” God brings

judgment on the sinful people of Israel, so that everyone will know that God's name is holy, that the Lord is not someone to mess around with.

Did you ever think of that when you pray the Lord's Prayer? When we say "Hallowed be thy name," we are praying that the honor of God's name will be restored, and that may require getting rid of all the people and institutions that bring dishonor to God's name, that give God a bad reputation.

There is a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip I have mentioned before where Moe, the playground bully, knocks Calvin off his swing and takes it from him. Calvin says, "It's hard to be religious when certain people are never incinerated by bolts of lightning."

More often than not God's name is dishonored by people. So to pray for God's name to be hallowed may require getting rid of the people in this world who give God a bad name, who by their actions damage God's reputation. And that, friends, could include us.

Now we are ready for the second scripture lesson. Turn to the back of the bulletin and look at Ezekiel 36:16-21. This is the story of what God did in the past.

(Read Ezekiel 36:16-21)

Do you now see the irony of this scripture passage? For the sake of God's holy name God sent the people of Israel into exile. They had profaned God's name, they had given God's name a bad reputation, by their lust, greed, and violence. So God got rid of them. But then the other nations said, "Whoa, these people belonged to the Lord and they were defeated by the Babylonians. God couldn't even save them. The Babylonian gods must be stronger." Now we realize that God's name, God's reputation, has been sullied by Israel's defeat. Sending them into exile made things worse.

Now follow along as I read the second paragraph: verses 22-28.

(Read Ezekiel 36:22-28)

Here is the good news: God's name is hallowed, God's reputation is upheld, not only when sinners are judged but when they are saved, not only when they are cleaned out but when they are cleaned up.

Let's be honest: I bet that every one of us here at some time or other has given people reason to doubt God. People have looked at us, every one of us at some time or other, and said, "Well, if that's the best God can do, I don't need God working on me." Maybe you have felt that way, just as Calvin did—like certain people are a blight on God's reputation. But did it ever occur to you that God's most impressive work, God's greatest trick, will not be getting rid of such people but transforming them into the people they were meant to be? The greatest glory of all will come to God not when all the sinners are cleaned out but when they are cleaned up. That is what Ezekiel is talking about here, and that is what we pray for every time we say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name."

A few years ago in a church magazine I read an interview with Dr. Phil. He talked about the pain of growing up with an alcoholic father and all the conflict and turmoil that produced in his family. But one day his father finally agreed to get help. It was hard. His father struggled with his drinking and with the irresponsible behavior he had used his drinking to excuse. But one day when Phil was older, his father said to him, “Do you know why I am working so hard on this?” Phil said, “I guess it’s because you feel so guilty for being so bad.” His father said, “Yeah, that’s part of it, but the truth is that I know that your relationship with your heavenly father will be a reflection of your relationship with your worldly father. And if you don’t trust me and if you don’t respect me and you don’t feel like you can count on me, then you will never trust, respect and count on your heavenly father. And the worst thing I can do for you is to take that away from you, and I don’t want that to happen because I am going to die and you are not going to have a father in this world and you are going to have a heavenly father to turn to, and that’s why I am working so hard on this.”

Do you see now what it means to pray “Hallowed be thy name”? It means to pray that we will be the kind of people that bring honor to God’s name, that God’s name will be made holy, not by cleaning us out but by cleaning us up.

- Ken Onstot
October 12, 2008