

Change Our Heart's - Part 2

by Richard Owen Roberts

The sermon explores the critical importance of maintaining God's glory and the consequences of failing to do so, as illustrated by the failures of Moses and Aaron.

Duration: 1:01:51

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:44

Topics: "Personal Testimony", "Gods Glory"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal story about his father's radical conversion to Christianity and his ministry in the county poorhouse. The speaker then recounts his own experience of being asked to preach at a young age and how his world expanded as he shared the Word of God in different settings. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing sin as both a passport to hell and a thief of God's glory, which he believes is often overlooked in the American evangelical movement. The sermon concludes with the speaker reflecting on how his responsibility to maintain the glory of God has grown as he continues to proclaim the gospel.

Transcript

I have a series of six scripture readings this evening, and I want you to join me in each of these six readings. The first is found in the book of Deuteronomy, at chapter 32. Some of you are immediately aware that the major portion of the 32nd chapter of Deuteronomy is devoted to that incredibly magnificent song that Moses composed, which we simply refer to as the Song of Moses.

This is Deuteronomy 32. It commences with verse 1, and it runs on through verse 43. I shall not go into it this evening, but I'm simply asking you to realize this constitutes the bulk of the 32nd chapter of Deuteronomy.

Our reading picks up at verse 44. Then Moses came, and he spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he with Joshua, the son of Nun. When Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, Take to your hearts all the words with which I am warning you today, which you shall command your sons to observe carefully even all the words of this law, for it is not an idle word for you.

Indeed, it is your life, and by this word you shall prolong your days in the land where you are about to cross over the Jordan to Post-Esseth. And the Lord spoke to Moses that very same day, saying, Go up to

this mountain of the Eberim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moses opposite Jericho, and look at the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the sons of Israel for a possession. Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people, because you broke faith with me in the midst of the sons of Israel at the waters of Meribah Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, because you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the sons of Israel.

For you shall see the land at a distance, but you shall not go there into the land which I am giving the sons of Israel. The second passage is in the book of Numbers at chapter 20, commencing at verse 1. Numbers chapter 20, verse 1. Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Now, Miriam died there and was buried there, and there was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron.

The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, if only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord. Why then have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness for us and our beast to die here? And why have you made us come up from Egypt to bring us into this wretched place? It is not a place of grain, or of figs, or of vines, or pomegranates, nor is there any water to drink. Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces.

Then the glory of the Lord appeared to them, and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, take the rod, and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation, and speak to the rock before their eyes that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock, and let the congregation and their beast drink. So Moses took the rod from before the Lord, just as he had commanded him, and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock, and he said to them, listen now, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and he struck the rock twice with his rod, and water came forth abundantly, and he and the congregation and their beast drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, because you have not believed me, who treat me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them. Those were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the Lord, and he proved himself holy among them. The third reading is from the same chapter, starting at verse 22.

So numbers 20, 22. Now when they set out from Kadesh, the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to Mount Hor, and the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron at Mount Hor by the border of the land of Edom, saying, Aaron shall be gathered to his people, for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the sons of Israel, because you rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. The fourth reading is in Numbers chapter 27.

Just three verses. Numbers 27, verse 12. Then the Lord said to Moses, walk to this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the sons of Israel, and when you have seen it, you too shall be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was.

For in the wilderness of Zin, during the strife of the congregation, you rebelled against my command to treat me as holy before their eyes at the water. And lest there be any confusion, these are the waters of Meribah at Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. The fifth reading requires us to return to the book of Deuteronomy, where we pick up a single verse in chapter 1, 37.

Deuteronomy 1, 37. Now the Lord was angry with me also on your account, saying, not even you shall enter there. And finally, number six, at Deuteronomy 3, commencing at verse 23.

Deuteronomy 3, verse 23. I also pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, O Lord God, thou hast begun to show thy servant thy greatness and thy strong hand for what God is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as thy. Let me, I pray thee, cross over and see the fair land that is beyond the Jordan, that good hill country and Lebanon.

But the Lord was angry with me on your account, and he would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, Enough! Speak to me no more on this matter. Go up to the top of Pisgah.

Lift up your eyes to the west and the north and the south and the east and see it with your own eyes, for you shall not cross over this Jordan, charged Joshua, and encourage him and strengthen him. For he shall go across as the head of this people, and he shall give them as an inheritance the land which you will see. So we remained in the valley opposite Beth Peor.

Some of you have learned, and others need to learn, that incredibly important distinction between sin as a passport to hell and sin as a thief of God's glory. One of the major tragedies of the American evangelical movement is that we refuse to give any kind of realistic consideration to thieving, stealing God's glory. And we concern ourselves almost totally with sin as a passport to hell.

I have made it clear, I have preached this material before, and I have learned that congregations like this seem to have only one concern. Someone is almost certain to rush up afterwards, and are you saying, Moses went to hell? There's something awfully wrong with your heart when you can read passages like this and worry about the issue of hell. There's something vastly more consequential than going to hell, that is robbing God of his glory.

God didn't create you to save you from hell. He created you to maintain his glory before the people. Some of you, despite your personal background, are aware that the Presbyterians developed at the time of the great Puritan revival an incredibly important statement of faith, which is described as the Westminster Standards.

The larger and the shorter catechism, which were used, as I implied already, by Baptists and Congregationalists and Presbyterians, the Reformed had their own Heidelberg catechism. But as a boy in a Presbyterian church, I was required to memorize the shorter catechism. And the question in the catechism was asked, what is man's chief end? And the answer that we memorize, and that has come back to me thousands of times since, is man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

God created you to glorify himself. And he sent Christ to die in your place and to take all your awful wickedness upon his own shoulder so that you might glorify him. And he called Moses, and he strengthened and used Moses for a very long time.

And Moses was careful to maintain God's glory before the people, to uphold God's holiness. But at the age of 120, he had the colossal failure of his life. Now the Lord has been teaching me personally a very important lesson.

I remember when my dad, who had been an ungodly fellow, and then suddenly, by the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, was radically converted. And his whole life changed. And he launched into a ministry.

He was just a factory worker in the huge General Electric company plant in Schenectady, New York. But his conversion was, as I said, radical. And my dad got a burden for the people in the county poorhouse.

And he commenced holding services on Friday evenings. For years and years and years, he conducted these services in the poorhouse. He had four stations that he went to every Friday night and proclaimed Jesus Christ.

And very soon after my conversion, as a boy of 12, dad said to me, Now tonight, you're to preach. And he named the sunroom where I was to preach. So he took three, I took one.

And from that time, I have been graciously permitted to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ well over 60 years by God's grace. But that first time I spoke in the sunroom in the Schenectady County poorhouse, my world, my personal world, expanded. It had been very small up until then.

But it had enlarged just a bit at that time. Then somebody asked me why I didn't preach on the street corner. And I couldn't think of any reason why I shouldn't.

And I did. And my world expanded again. And then someone proposed that I go to the county jail and proclaim Christ.

And it expanded further. And month after month, year after year, even up until this evening, my world has enlarged every single time I have spoken the word of God. You see, initially I had but a tiny handful of those for whom I was personally responsible to maintain the glory of God.

But every time I spoke the word of God to another group, my responsibility enlarged. It enlarges to that point where you become critically concerned. What if after all these gracious years, I should suddenly do what Moses did? I want to ask you plainly, do you see how your world of responsibility is expanding? This afternoon we were delighted to hear the testimony of a string of couples who told us about their enlarged world that came about through the privilege of ministry in South Africa.

Now they're responsible not only for souls in these United States that their lives have touched, but for all those in South Africa, and for many of them, numerous other parts of the world as well. Do you not sense immediately that the need of our maintaining the glory of God before the people is an ever-increasing need? And the opportunity of failure, the opportunity of robbing God of His glory is growing at the same ratio as our responsibility. I'm asking you to face very seriously the problem that Moses and Aaron encountered and the colossal failure of their lives.

When they robbed God of His glory. We're dealing with the judgments of God. I tried to explain when I spoke to you earlier, that we really are speaking in a slightly broader sense than merely remedial judgments.

We are speaking of the righteous judgments of God, which do include both remedial and final. And they also include judgments like the judgment that is rendered against Moses and Aaron in the six passages that we have read together. Now let's be sure that we're facing precisely the accusations that the Lord God is making against Moses and his brother.

Let's go back over the critical element in each of the passages we've read. In the Deuteronomy 32 passage, you broke faith with me in the midst of the sons of Israel. You broke faith with me.

Now what did Moses do? Did Moses stand before the people and say, all these years I've been believing in the Lord God omnipotent, but finally at age 120 I've come to realize it's all a myth. There is no God. No, oh no.

No indeed, nothing like that at all. He broke faith. Now I was reminded this evening by a sweet sister of a sermon that I preached here at the Cedars some years ago.

And apparently, I don't remember doing such a thing, but she said that I used the expression be all. Be all. Body older.

But they gave it a different significance. But I do recall that time in my life when I took my Bible and marked in the margin every single occurrence that I could discover of that incredibly important combination of belief and obedience. You see, the problem with Moses was not that he denied the Lord God, not that he recanted his position as a servant of the Most High.

His problem is that he failed to keep in proper relationship belief and obedience. And so the Lord denounces him, accuses him, straight to the face of having broken faith. Now look at your own heart.

Is it possible that you are believing things you are not practicing? Are you even teaching others things that you yourself do not practice? Here, we have Moses, that stalwart of God, accused by the Lord God omnipotent of breaking faith. But God also says concerning him in Deuteronomy 32, you did not treat me as holy in the midst of the sons of Israel. Do you realize that God has taken his great glory and entrusted both his glory and his holiness to us to maintain before our world? While I am speaking figuratively at the moment, it is as if we carry in our own hands the glory of God and before the people we are the representatives of his holiness.

Now, we had a strong word from Henry on that subject this afternoon. But Moses is accused of breaking faith and of not maintaining God's holiness before the people. Now that's bad enough, but there's a third accusation leveled against Moses in Numbers chapter 20, verse 12.

You have not believed me, who treat me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel. So he not only broke faith, and he not only failed to treat God as holy, he did not believe the Lord. And again, the evidence that he did not believe is that he did not obey.

It is absurd to insist that you believe the Lord when you will not obey him. Now, some of you have very cleverly argued against opponents, telling them that the devils believe, but are clearly not regarded by God as acceptable. And some have even gone so far to say, not only do the devils believe, but they have the grace to tremble.

But they're certainly not acceptable to God. And we can know all that and much more, and ourselves fail to practice what we preach to others. But there's a fourth accusation.

You have rebelled against my command at the waters of Meribah. Numbers 20, verse 24. So you broke faith, you didn't treat me as holy, you didn't believe me, you even went so far as to rebel against my command.

And in Numbers 27 at verse 14, both Moses and Aaron are accused by God Almighty of disobedience. You did not honor me as holy before the people until you disobeyed my command. Now, there's similarity in the five accusations, but you put them all together and they constitute a matter of very great

consequence.

And the concern that I bear toward you this evening is a concern that with all your deep devotion and all your earnest desire to serve the Lord, you might very well end up as Moses ended up. Now, I said already some would be apt to rush up and say, are you saying that Moses went to hell? No, I've already made it clear I'm not saying that. I believe with all my heart that God has a call upon the life of every believer, that there isn't a single believer here tonight, but what God has a call upon their life and a purpose.

And what if you never complete the call, you never finish the work that God has given you to do, because like Moses, you break faith, you rebel, you rob God of his glory. We need to face this. In my understanding of things, there's something much worse than going to hell for me.

You may not feel this yourself, but I feel it deeply. As a boy, I wrestled with God concerning his call upon my life, not striving against God unwilling, but simply not understanding how a little simpleton like me with no gifts and no skill could ever fulfill the call that I sensed upon my life. I was called to proclaim the matter of revival.

I knew it as a boy. I never had any other aspiration or desire but to call the church to repenting, that the church might experience again the manifest pleasance of God. Somehow as a boy, I thought that it would get easier as the years progressed, that the temptations toward failure would lessen, that the time would come when I would just simply be so thoroughly holy there was no possibility of being otherwise.

I'm only 75, and it hasn't come yet, but some of you have heard me say my own dear mother lived to the age of 102, and she was one of the most gracious and sweet-spirited women I have ever known. But at 102, she became somewhat cantankerous and difficult. It didn't become easy for her at 102.

I wonder if 106 would do it, or maybe 124. We've got to face the fact the longer we persevere in the will and the purpose of God, the stronger will be the antagonism of our enemy. There's a whole lot more for him to gain by your fall now than your fall five years ago.

The larger your world becomes, the greater the advantage of Satan if he can bring you down. But let's go back to the Numbers 20 passage and carefully review the facts that are laid out for us in that incredibly important passage describing in more than adequate detail the fall of our brothers Moses and Aaron. So our concern now is to analyze the conduct of Moses and Aaron as revealed in the 20th chapter of Numbers.

First off, be sure you see the setting that is created for us in the last few words of verse 1. Now Miriam died there and was buried there. That is a very important statement. We must understand there was an incredible closeness between Moses and his brother and his sister.

Oh, they had their tensions and conflicts, but they had labored together in the service of the Lord for a long period of time, and now suddenly they have lost their sister. Surely the loss of those close to us does create an emotional atmosphere where the devil can reap rich rewards for his wicked purposes. But we don't find any excuse offered either to Moses or Aaron because of the death of their sister Miriam.

There are some of you, perhaps, who are still justifying your bad conduct by explaining the loss of your husband or your wife. But that'll never wash with God. I'm not discounting the consequence of those grievous seasons.

A few of you will remember the year that Maggie and I were scheduled to come to the cedar, and on the Sunday before the Labor Day weekend, in taking a shower, she fell, and she broke a few ribs, and it hurt, but it wasn't all that serious when everything is said and done. So I took her to the hospital to see what help they could give, and they gave her a medication. And she took the medication faithfully.

She's very faithful in doing whatever she's ordered to. But this time, very much to her detriment, because in a few days, she was on the edge of death. I had to call here on the Friday and say I couldn't possibly come.

Maggie was in the intensive care unit. Initially, they thought for sure she would die, but in the grace of God, and frankly, in response to the prayers of God's people, she was raised up. But some of you have been there as well.

You know what races through your mind and heart at critical times like that. And you know that you're not even thinking clearly in some respects. And you know how vulnerable you are, and how especially if someone were to speak an unkind word at a time like that.

Suppose someone had called from Cedars and had failed me because I was unwilling to leave my wife in that dying state. I think that I would have sinned in my response to that. I'm just simply trying to portray what is so perfectly obvious.

Moses and Aaron are at the crucial juncture of their lives. But God does not excuse their colossal failure because of the emotional situation they're encountering. Is it not crystal clear in the reading of Numbers 20 that their great sin was a sin of anger? Now, some of you have excused a bad temper for a great many years.

And some of you women in particular have simply explained, well, it's that time of month. But is there ever an excuse provided by God for us to rob him of his glory? For us to fail to maintain his holiness before the people. But not only was this a sin of anger, every indication as I see it is that it was also a sin of hate.

God spoke to Moses and instructed him to speak to the rock. Do you think God would have been offended if Moses had said, oh Lord, you know how agitated I have allowed myself to become by the mean-spirited, wicked criticism of these people. Lord, would you give me a few minutes to retreat to a prayer closet and to seek your face? Do you think God would have clubbed him down if he asked for the time that it took to bring his emotions and his anger under the control of the Spirit of God? I think not.

I'm aware of pastors who have served for years in a congregation then totally lost their ministry because of an outburst of anger. And right now in this room, I have no doubt, but there are parents weeping over wayward children. And those children are wayward because their parents did not maintain the glory of God before them.

So we have an outburst of anger. We have an act of haste. It is obvious also that there is a great issue of exasperation and weariness in this passage.

I guess most of you know this already, but I'm hardly the most popular fellow in the world. And I think I know at least a little something about having people who are angry with me and misinterpreting what I say and spreading rumors that are quite inaccurate. It's easy, oh so easy, to get exasperated.

But I'm not half as tempted to get exasperated with you as I am with Maggie. The one person in all the world that I love most, I can let myself go and give her a good verbal assault if I'm not careful. And it's a severe problem to be exasperated with my wife as it is with the congregation.

All of us run this incredible danger of robbing our Lord of His glory by allowing the mean-spiritedness, the evil intent even, that so often accompanies opposition to the work of God in the church. Or just the stupidity of people saying with great honesty, we never did it this way before. There are incredible numbers of ways that people can drive us to a spirit of exasperation.

But whenever we allow ourselves to move even slightly in that direction, we set ourselves up to be thieves of the glory of God. But notice as well that this was clearly a sin that demonstrated a lack of self-control. I tried to put significance into the reading of verse 10 when we first read the passage.

Can't you hear the loathing in Moses' voice and heart when he cries out, Listen now, you rebels! And they were rebels, there's no denying. They're rebellious hearts. No need to cover up the conduct of this evil people.

But our concern is not the conduct of the evil people around us. Our concern is the glory of God entrusted to our care. When was the last time you lost control and brought grievous dishonor to the Lord? Now this was also a sin that involved a misuse of divinely given authority.

Moses had a rod. The rod was given him by God. He had instructions concerning the rod.

On a former occasion, when a similar problem arose of a lack of water, Moses was commanded to strike the rock with the rod. And he did. But this time, the command was to speak to the rock.

And instead, he struck it. Now we have to understand that the water flowed despite his disobedience. And it was plentiful.

And all the people and their beasts and Moses and Aaron had sufficiency of water. But he abused his authority. For those of us who are itinerant, one of the regular issues that we encounter that break our heart is that of pastors who abuse their authority.

That of deacons who abuse their authority. That of Sunday school teachers who abuse their authority. I hope I've made it clear.

The water still flows. But the authority entrusted to Moses was abused by Moses himself. Is there any way in which you're abusing the authority that a gracious God has committed to you? But I would mention as well that this particular sin is what we describe technically or theologically as an aggravated sin.

Now I know that's not the term that most Christians use or perhaps even understand its meaning. But there are sins that are aggravated sins. At one time, Maggie and I lived in the country and we had a bit of a hill going up to our home.

And during the winter time, it becomes often extremely difficult because the hill would ice over. Well, on one of these awful winters, despite the fact that I had a cut in my hand, I took the bucket of salt and I went out to salt the driveway. And the salt aggravated the cut.

You can get the feel of that, can't you? But now, our concern tonight is not a cut aggravated by salt, but a sin aggravated by special circumstances. A sin that is made worse by the circumstances in which the sin

occurs. Come back to the text in Numbers chapter 20, verse 6. Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting and fell on their faces.

Then the glory of the Lord appeared. Some of us have been praying for decades that the glory of the Lord would appear. That the fire would fall, to use the expression John gave us early this morning.

And here, Moses and Aaron had an experience with God that every earnest Christian craves. With all his heart to experience. For God to draw near, to manifest His glory.

And this is an aggravated sin because just at the time God revealed Himself to them to such an extent that they fell on their faces before Him. God issues a simple order to Moses and he disobeyed. Now some of you know a whole lot more about aggravated sins than you have any right to know.

Some of you have found in your own experience that when you've had a mountaintop spiritual experience, the devil is right at hand. Maggie and I had one of those incredible times in the state of Colorado where God came in a most wonderful way. We just had an incredible experience with God and with the people of God.

And when we reached home after that glorious occasion, somehow as we were unlocking the door of our home and entering, I said something wicked or she said something wicked. I don't know which of us started it. But we were at one another in a moment of time.

But suddenly we were arrested and we said, isn't that just like Satan? There we have been with God in a mountaintop experience. And suddenly, for no reason whatsoever, not that that really mattered, but there we were cutting up each other. For some of you, this weekend at the Cedars will be a genuine mountaintop experience.

Be careful that you don't commit an aggravated sin. A sin made to work by the circumstances in which the sin occurred. But let me mention just a wee bit more that is so crystal clear in this passage.

Not only a sin of anger and haste and exasperation, a sin that demonstrates a lack of self-control and a misuse of divine authority an aggravated sin, but it's a sin that is in direct contradiction to an expressly spoken command. Sometimes we sin in ignorance. Sometimes we're not crystal clear what it is we ought to do.

But there wasn't any question about what Moses should have done. And yet, in the light of the simple and yet straightforward command, he took that rod and walloped the rock. And it appears to me as I go over the passage that despite the fact that Moses is described as a meek man, there is a very clear element of pride here.

It's as if Moses is saying, I don't deserve this kind of people, this kind of reproach and condemnation from you reprobate. And some of us are often tempted to rise up and insist that we deserve better than we're getting from the people around us. But I want to ask my dear brother Don to stand.

I want to stand next to him. I want you to see us. And I want you to face the fact there are an awful lot of years of service and ministry represented in these two old men.

Moses, 120. Aaron, well, I don't know. But I know between them they represented more years than Don and I represent.

But I want you to understand age is no preservative against evil. This dear brother is as capable of a fall as I am. And the two of us together have incredible capacity to rob God of His glory.

And every person here, young and old, has that capacity. See to it. See to it that it doesn't happen.

We've got to face the seriousness of robbing God of His glory. We've got to come to grips with the fact that being saved from hell is of minor consequence in comparison with the purpose for which we were created and redeemed. And our hearts have got to be constantly in the profound grip of earnestly maintaining the holiness of God before His people.

Moses sinned by allowing the grievous conduct and the bad mouthing of God's people to affect his own attitude and his own actions. And some of you are very gifted in justifying your failure in blaming it on somebody else who's not behaving properly. But each of us is going to answer for our own failure.

By human standards, the sin of Moses and Aaron was of small consequence. But by divine standards, it's a matter of incredible consequence. Reread with me verses 12 and 13 of Numbers 20.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, Because you have not believed Me to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them. These were the waters of Meribah, because the sons of Israel contended with the Lord, and He proved Himself holy among them. How? How did God prove Himself holy among the people? By ordering both Aaron and Moses to die on the wrong side of the land of promise.

What if you were to serve the Lord faithfully for 60 years, and then allow a colossal sin, like robbing God of His glory, to keep you from ever finishing your life's work? Moses was not merely called to lead the people out of Egypt. He was called to lead them into the land of promise. And because he did not maintain God's holiness before the people, God was forced to maintain it at Moses' expense.

I want to make five applications of these truths, and then we'll be finished. Application 1. A people that assemble against their leader may provoke even the most aged and godly.

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