

Numbers 11:24-30

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So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. ²⁵ Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it. ²⁶ Now two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the Spirit rested on them. They were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." ²⁸ And Joshua the son of Nun, the assistant of Moses from his youth, said, "My lord Moses, stop them." ²⁹ But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!" ³⁰ And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

"It's not fair!" Have you ever heard that one before? If you're a parent, you have. If you're a teacher, you have. In fact, if you've ever had dealings with anyone at all, you've heard someone proclaim that "it's not fair." And you've probably said it yourself on a number of occasions. You see, humans have a strong sense of what's fair, and when we feel like we've been wronged or been treated *unfairly*, we like to let people know about it! "It's not fair!"

Of course, our frequent demands for fairness are usually only focused in one direction: on ourselves. Rarely will you hear someone arguing for fairness on behalf of *another* person. And if the occasion arises where a person finds themselves the *beneficiary* of unfair treatment, rarely will they speak up. It's like when you're watching sports. If you see a penalty or infraction of some kind go uncalled at the *detriment* of your favorite team, you'll likely let the TV know about it. *But*, if you see *your* team go unpenalized for an obvious penalty or infraction, you'll probably keep your mouth shut. You see, we care about fairness but only when we feel that *we've* been treated unfairly.

Unfair treatment and feelings of unfair treatment are at the heart of everything that's going on in our text this morning. Several individuals feel like they've been treated unfairly, and they grow jealous. How can we avoid doing the same? We'll answer that question today as we consider the theme:

The Work of the Holy Spirit:

Turning "Jealous" Into "Zealous"

Our text is tracking the Children of Israel sojourning in the wilderness, and we find them here just a few days after they've left Mount Sinai (where God had spoken to the people through Moses). And as we often associate with the Children of Israel during this time period, they were complaining. They were *more* than dissatisfied. In their minds, things just weren't fair. Now, these *were* the people who had only recently been freed from slavery in Egypt. Future generations of Israel would *not* know enforced hard labor as *they* had, *because* God had delivered them. And *now*, God was leading them to their *own* country. He led them with His visible presence, appearing in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day. They didn't have to worry about food for the journey because every morning they woke up to a fresh dusting of manna covering the ground—manna, which is described in this very chapter as delicious, able to be baked into cakes with the sweet taste of oil. *Heavenly* food.

So, what did they lack? Nothing at all! But what did they *want*? We find that at the beginning of this chapter: ***“Oh that we had meat to eat!”*** they said. ***“We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”*** (Numbers 11:4-6) Life just wasn't fair. They compared their lives now to how they had gone before, they compared *their* meals with what they *knew* was gracing the tables of the Egyptians, and they were jealous. And they complained.

So, in response, God told Moses to gather together seventy elders of Israel and to bring them to the tent of meeting where He would meet them. And that brings us to the events of our text. ***“So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud...”*** You can almost picture it, can't you? Seventy elders plus Moses, gathered around this tent of meeting for a visit from God. Suddenly, a great cloud filled with God's awesome power and glory looms large over them all. What would He do?! Would a bolt of lightning crack down from the cloud to destroy them? Maybe fire would hail down and consume them, perhaps a torrential rainfall that would sweep them all away from the LORD's presence?

No, none of that. Instead, the LORD treats them...*unfairly!* The LORD showers upon them a *blessed* unfairness. ***“The LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied.”*** God answered their complaints—their jealousy—with *mercy*. Mercy, you can think of as God, in love, *not* giving us what we deserve. God responds according to His character, described in the Psalms as, ***“Gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”*** (Psalm 145:8)

The LORD responded to their jealousy and their proclamations of unfairness by sending forth the Holy Spirit upon those seventy elders so that they might prophesy. The substance of their prophecies, we do not hear. But we know that they were speaking the Word of the Lord, Word made effective by the Holy Spirit, which is the proper solution for jealousy.

We'll come back to that solution for jealousy in a little bit, but first, we need to look at a certain reaction to all of this. While this Spirit-giving event took place at the tent of meeting, God was also busy working elsewhere. Two men, by the name of Eldad and Medad, whom Moses *hadn't* summoned as a part of this gathering and so were still in the camp—they *also* received this Spirit as well, and *they* began to prophesy. And word of this came back to Joshua, Moses' aide and second-in-command, and he was filled with angst. Apparently, Joshua did not think, based on his own reckoning, that these men were worthy of such gifts. Joshua took this news and ran to Moses and said, ***“Moses, stop them!”***

What exactly Joshua was thinking in this whole exchange, we cannot know. But it seems apparent that feelings of jealousy might have been the motivating factor. It just wasn't fair that these men should be so richly blessed; they hadn't even come to the tent of meeting! So, to recap: jealousy prompted this meeting between the people and God, and when God responded to their sin with this blessed outpouring, the response, at least from Joshua, was *more* jealousy. It wasn't fair! And, I will admit: I can relate to Joshua here. And perhaps you can too.

Maybe you don't consider yourself the jealous type. Sure, maybe when you were a child you grew jealous of friends from time-to-time, but as you grew into an adult you gained a bit of perspective and are now much more content with what you have. But there's another type of jealousy of which I believe we're all guilty. It's the type of jealousy that comes—not from something you lack, but—from something you enjoy a lot of.

Let me explain with an example from my own life: when I was younger, I was a pretty good baseball player. And my family would come to watch, and my dad would coach, and sure there were many suggestions on things for me to correct, but there was also lots of happiness for me when I played well. And I appreciated that. That wasn't the problem. The problem for me came when we'd go and watch my brothers play and when they played well. My problem came when my younger brother hit his first out-of-the-park homerun, and we all celebrated. *Outwardly*, we celebrated, because inwardly, *I* was not celebrating. For some reason, I took my family's joy over my younger brother's success as a sort of indictment against the fact that *I* had not ever hit a homerun over the fence. I was jealous. It was upsetting to me that I was good at something for which my brother also received attention.

And maybe that's a type of jealousy that you can relate to as well. It's the type of jealousy that is characterized by a sense of competition. It's the type of jealousy that shows itself when you receive a good grade on a paper, a grade that you are very pleased with *until* you find out that your best friend received higher marks. And then there's jealousy. There's resentment. There's bitterness. And I think deep in this attitude of jealousy is an attitude towards God. It's an attitude that God isn't fair! It's this attitude that we deserve what we get when God gives us good things and that certain others don't.

Jealousy. We see it in ourselves. We see it in Joshua. But Joshua isn't the only character in this story. There's another: Moses. And he responds to the news very differently than Joshua does. Listen to his response: ***“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!”*** He does not express jealousy for someone else encroaching on his turf; he's *zealous* for God's turf. For God's kingdom. And so, instead of proclaiming that it just wasn't fair that He had walked and talked with God all these years and now God just poured out His Spirit on others too, instead he rejoices in the work that God was accomplishing through others.

Moses' zealousness reflects an attitude about God that is very different. Moses recognizes that God is unfair—*blessedly* unfair. *Graciously* unfair. *Generously* unfair. God lavishes his Spirit on weak and prideful sinners. And it's a wondrous thing that God is *so unfair* in this way, because if God was fair, we'd be condemned. We'd be damned for our sin, including for our petty and prideful jealousies.

But God is *unfair*. But He is *not* unjust. Sin had to be paid for. God could not simply sweep our sin under the rug. It had to be accounted for, and it had to be atoned for. So, God atoned for our sin—God responded to our sin—by pouring out His Son for us. Jesus came into this world and was perfect and holy. He did not crumble to temptation, not even the temptation of jealousy. And yet He took our sins, our selfishness, our pride, our “it's not fair” attitudes, and nailed them with His body to the cross. The result is that God does indeed justify you through Jesus Christ, that is that God declares you right, that *all* is right between you and God. You are announced to be righteous and holy in God's eyes, as much as Jesus Himself was, since He substituted for you.

In His death and resurrection, Christ proclaimed for you this continual blessed unfairness of God. That though we have *earned* only death for ourselves, as **“the wages of sin is death,”** (Romans 6:23) Jesus declares that we get life instead. We have it, and we have it abundantly. And *as* Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father, He has continued to exercise His authority by giving you more. More blessings. The most important one: the gift of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. You see, *that* gift was not just given to those 70 elders at the tent of meeting; the Holy Spirit was also poured out on Pentecost onto the twelve apostles and again upon the 3,000 people who believed and were baptized and were saved. And there’s still more, because God has now poured out His Holy Spirit upon you. This has brought to fulfillment Moses’ wish: **“Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!”** He’s done so now with you.

Now, sometimes the Holy Spirit is called the forgotten person of the Trinity. It is true that we do invoke the name of the Holy Spirit at the beginning of every service, we baptize in His name, we confess what we believe about the Holy Spirit in our creeds, and yet the Holy Spirit doesn’t seem to play much of a prominent role in our preaching or in our teaching. And that’s because in God’s way of working things out in this world, *Jesus Christ* is the object our faith clings to. The Holy Spirit’s place in all of this is to make Christ *our* experience. His goal is for us to believe that *Jesus* is Lord; that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He desires that we recognize *Jesus* as the way, the truth, and the life; to believe that His Word is truth.

And the Holy Spirit directs us to that Word so that we can learn the *truth* about God. What does God think about us? How does God respond to our sin? What does God want for us? Jesus once said to His disciples, **“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”** (John 14:9) If we know what Jesus is like, we know what God is like, since Jesus is God. And so, the Holy Spirit serves you by pointing you to Jesus, so that you can *know* God. So that you can know that God does not respond to our incessant desires to only serve ourselves by sending a hail of fire to wipe us away. That is what we *deserve*, but it’s not what Christ does. Instead, He responds by serving up His own life in our place. He responds by putting *us* first. He responds by offering us forgiveness through His body and blood. He responds by giving us the opportunity to be baptized and become members of *His* family. He responds by pouring out blessing upon blessing, the greatest of all being the His Holy Spirit so that we can cling to this grace.

So, how will we respond now? Will we continue to focus on “me,” hell-bent on making sure everything is fair enough for *me*? Or will our focus be on “Christ *for* me”? That’s the question: jealous or zealous? Jealous for our own turf or zealous for God’s turf? There’s only a one-letter difference between those two English words, and yet there’s a *world* of difference between them. And if left to our own devices, we would be stuck in the camp of the jealous. Our only focus could be on ourselves. Thanks be to God that He has sent His Holy Spirit to you so that you know and believe in that blessed unfairness of God, how He has graciously given you all that you do *not* deserve.

So, who cares about making sure everything is fair for me, when Christ has given His *life* for me? Who cares what seems right in your eyes, when you have been declared *right* in God’s eyes. God has forgiven the penalty, and it worked out in your favor. So may God continue to pour out His Holy Spirit upon us, for each of us **Turning Jealous into Zealous.** In Jesus’ name. Amen.