

Do Not Touch!

I Samuel 6:1-7:2

By **Dr. Derek Thomas**

We are going to look tonight at chapter 6 and the opening two verses — at least the opening verse of chapter 7. This morning as I was listening to Ligon's exposition in Luke, it occurred to me on several levels that there were connections between that sermon this morning and this text...this somewhat somber and difficult, and in places bizarre, text that we have before us tonight. Because in both passages we encounter the holiness of God. In both passages we are forced to ask the question, Is God safe? What is it like to come into the presence of a God who is altogether holy? Well, before we read this passage together, let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we do thank You for the Bible. We thank You that You have given to us a book in all of its parts, every jot and tittle of it, every syllable, every least stroke of a pen is the product of Your outbreathing and is therefore exactly as You desire it to be, and infallible and inerrant. And so, Lord, again we want to be submissive. We want to be servants of the word. We want to be beneath the word and not over it. We want to be critiqued by the word and not to be critics of it. And we pray tonight for the work of Your Spirit to mold and shape and fashion our minds and wills and hearts so that we might worship You as You are, and not as we sometimes make You to be. So hear us and bless us we pray. We ask it all in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is God's holy word:

The ark of the Lord was in the country of the Philistines seven months.

[You'll remember the ark had been taken by the Philistines. The Israelites had thought to take it into battle with them and it had spent some time in Ashdod and at Gath, and then at Ekron, which is where it is now.]

And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, "What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place." They said, "If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why His hand does not turn away from you." And they said, "What is the guilt offering that we shall return to Him?"

They answered, "Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines, for the same plague was on all of you and on your lords. So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel. Perhaps He will lighten His hand from off you and your gods and your land. Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts? After He had dealt severely with them, did they not send the people away, and they departed? Now then, take and prepare a new cart and two milk cows on which there has never come a yoke, and yoke the cows to the cart, but take their calves home, away from them. And take the ark of the Lord and place it on the cart and put in a box at its side the figures of gold, which you are returning to Him as a guilt offering. Then send it off and let it go its way and watch. If it goes up on the way to its own land, to Beth-shemesh, then it is He who has done us this great harm, but if not, then we shall know that it is not His hand that struck us; it happened to us by coincidence."

The men did so, and took two milk cows and yoked them to the cart and shut up their calves at home. And they put the ark of the Lord on the cart and the box with the golden mice and the images of their tumors. And the cows went straight in the direction of Beth-shemesh along one highway, lowing as they went. They turned neither to the right nor to the left, and the lords of the Philistines went after them as far as the border of Beth-shemesh. Now the people of Beth-shemesh were reaping their wheat harvest in the valley. And when they lifted up their eyes and saw the ark, they rejoiced to see it. The cart came into the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh and stopped there. A great stone was there. And they split up the wood of the cart and offered the cows as a burnt offering to the Lord. And the Levites took down the ark of the Lord and the box that was beside it, in which were the golden figures, and set them upon the great stone. And the men of Beth-shemesh offered burnt offerings and sacrificed sacrifices on that day to the Lord. And when the five lords of the Philistines saw it, they returned that day to Ekron.

These are the golden tumors that the Philistines returned as a guilt offering to the Lord: one for Ashdod, one for Gaza, one for Ashkelon, one for Gath, one for Ekron, and the golden mice, according to the number of all the cities of the Philistines belonging to the five lords, both fortified cities and unwallled villages. The great stone beside which they set down the ark of the Lord is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth-shemesh.

And He struck some of the men of Beth-shemesh, because they looked upon the ark of the Lord. He struck seventy men of them...

[Now some of you may be reading the King James Version. I think it says 50,070,

and Hebrew scholars think that that is an error of translation and it should rather be five for every thousand, making the population of Beth-Shemesh about 10,000, which would make a whole lot more sense.]

... He struck seventy men of them, and the people mourned because the Lord had struck the people with a great blow. And the men of Beth-shemesh said, "Who is able to stand before the Lord, this holy God? And to whom shall He go up away from us?" So they sent messengers to the inhabitants of Kiriath-jearim, saying, "The Philistines have returned the ark of the Lord. Come down and take it up to you."

And the men of Kiriath-jearim came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord. From the day that the ark was lodged at Kiriath-jearim, a long time passed, some twenty years, and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.

Well, thus far God's holy, infallible word.

Now there are two problems that modern man finds with biblical Christianity.

One is the doctrine of the wrath of God, and perhaps a close second to that is the issue of suffering. Why would a God of love allow suffering in the world? And even more poignant perhaps, why would a God of love inflict suffering in the world? Well, this passage addresses both of those issues.

Our ruling elder tonight in the prayer correctly identified the key text, and that is verse 20, the question of the men of Beth-shemesh (at least, the first question). The second question was way off target, but the first question was, "Who is able to stand before this Lord, this holy God?" Is there a more important question than that? I want to know if there is, because it seems to me that that is the most important question that you and I can ever face, not just in this life, but in the world to come as we face God before the judgment seat of Christ. Who can stand before the holiness of God? It's the gospel question. It's the question every man and woman and boy and girl in this universe tonight must address. How can you, how can I, sinners as we are, come before a holy and just and righteous God and not be consumed? You will remember that it was the great question that began the Reformation. It was the question that Luther wrestled with: How can I come before a holy God? How can I stand in His presence?

I. God is holy.

This text tonight tells us at least two, perhaps three things, the first of which is God is holy. God is holy. The Philistines have captured the ark — this box, this wooden box made of acacia wood. It was the size of a chest that some of you

might have at the end of your bed, in which you might keep bed linen. It was overlaid with gold. It had the golden cherubim on the top of the ark. It was the symbol of the presence of God. Where the ark was, God was. At this point in the history of redemption, the ark was the visible representation, manifestation, of the presence of God. And the Israelites in a moment of folly, of unmitigated folly, had used the ark as a kind of talisman...as a kind of good luck charm...and had taken the ark into the battle with them against the Philistines. And the Philistines had routed them and taken the ark, and it had gone to Ashdod, where you remember that Dagon, the god of the Ashdodites, the god of the Philistines, had collapsed — had fallen. They had come into the temple and discovered that their powerful god Dagon had lost his head and his arms, and was in a heap on the floor before the ark of the covenant. And it had been sent away.

God had struck city after city of the Philistines with...well, tumors. I told you two weeks ago that the Hebrew word is somewhat ambivalent. Some commentators think it's a reference to...well, there's no other way of saying it...hemorrhoids. And I told you then of the Vulgate, Jerome's luscious translation, that "God struck them in the secret parts of their posteriors"—which is a wonderful translation. Others believe that this tumor, this reference to this tumor, is a reference to the bubonic plague. The reference here to mice, or perhaps to rats...and as you know, rats were the cause of the spread of bubonic plague in 1665, for example, in London. It was the sequel to the Great Fire of London.

There is a problem here, and the Philistines identify it in verse 2. They need to get rid of the ark of the covenant. If the ark of the covenant is the cause of this plague in which thousands now of people have died, they need to get rid of the ark of the covenant. And the question is put to the priests and the diviners: What shall we do with the ark of the Lord? Tell us, with what shall we send it to its place?

It's a very insightful question. They realize that they can't just send the ark of the covenant back. Even in this pagan religion, even though these Philistines were pagans and they were idolaters...they worshiped a multiplicity of gods, and having the ark of the covenant was just one more deity to add to their pantheon. But they realized that if God had been offended, He needed to be propitiated. They needed to send something back with the ark to appease His wrath. It's an insightful thing on the part of the Philistines. God needs to be propitiated. His wrath has been manifested. The Philistines were aware of that; they realized that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness of men.

Modern man doesn't accept the wrath of God. God isn't angry. They find the concept of the wrath of God wholly unacceptable. Rabbi Kushner: "How good do I need to be?" He wrote a book called *How Good Do I Need to Be?* It was on Yom Kippur in the tabernacle, and he uttered those very famous words. They're often cited. He was referring to Adam and Eve, and how Adam and Eve had

been driven from the garden for breaking a trivial commandment. And Rabbi Kushner said, "I came to the point where I really didn't want to believe in a God like that." (A God who punishes for what he thought was a relatively trivial commandment.) It was a typical statement of modern man. Modern man finds the whole notion and doctrine of the wrath of God just wholly unacceptable and this passage is confronting this head-on.

Here is God. Here is the ark of the covenant. And these Philistines are very conscious that in sending the ark of the covenant away — preferably back to the Israelites — God needs to be at peace. God's wrath has to be dealt with.

I wonder tonight what you think of that. I mean, be honest. I want to know what you think of that, of that concept of God — a God who punishes, a God who inflicts disease. A plague, whatever it was, causes men to die. In the course of these chapters, something in the region of 35,000-50,000 people are dead. I wonder what you think of that. You wouldn't be alone tonight in thinking that that sounds kind of spiteful, and mean and petty and vindictive. You might be in a position tonight and you're saying, 'I really don't want to believe in a God like that, because my God is a God of love,' because you bow down at the altar of tolerance, and this is wholly intolerant. You see, my friends, what drives that thought is the idea of entitlement: that we are, you and I, entitled to be dealt with in a tolerant way.

I had a student in my office — he's not in the building, I don't think. I'd given him a relatively poor grade, and he was miffed and he told me so. And he said to me (and I remember his words very well)...he said, "I worked hard for this course and I deserve a better grade." I asked him to repeat the sentence he'd just uttered, because I frankly didn't believe it. I said to him, "But your answers were wrong." "But I worked hard!" In other words, there was the feeling of entitlement. It's typical of modern man. It's how most people think, that they're entitled to be dealt with in a certain way, and God is a God of tolerance.

My dear friend, I have to tell you tonight that the God of Scripture is a God who is holy; a God who is utterly holy. He is so holy that He cannot look upon sin. He cannot look upon infringement of His law.

Now I want to ask you tonight which God is more loving? The God of tolerance or the God of Scripture? Because the God of Scripture, this holy God, this righteous God, can only forgive by sending His own Son and inflicting upon His Son the punishment that our sins deserve. But the God of tolerance doesn't have to do anything. The God of tolerance can just say, 'I forgive you.' That doesn't cost you anything. I want to ask you tonight, which God is more loving? The God who is prepared despite His holy character to send His Son to die on the cross of Calvary, or the God who simply says, 'I forgive you'? I want to challenge tonight that the God of tolerance is a more loving God.

II. The wrong way to deal with holiness.

But there's a second thing I want us to see here: that there's a wrong way to deal with holiness. There's a wrong way to deal with holiness. How did the Ekronites answer the question that was asked in verse 4?

“What is the guilt offering that we should return to Him?” They answered, ‘Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines....’”

There were five major cities, five lords, and they send back five golden tumors and five golden mice.

Well, okay, it's bizarre. It's odd. It's quirky. It doesn't make any sense to us whatsoever that you'd make a gold representation of a tumor unless you believe in sympathy magic...unless you believe in some kind of sympathetic magic. This is paganism, you understand. You make a representation of the blight that is afflicting you, and you make it in the most costly way possible...make it of gold. You ask the folks to come in and make this mold and pour in this molten gold into that mold, and then you send it away to appease the deity. This is paganism in the raw. It's entirely distorted, of course.

Now God does need propitiating. God's justice must not only be done, but it must be seen to be done. Everyone believes in justice. Even the modern man who worships at the altar of tolerance believes in justice. They believe in the courts, they believe in judges — even liberal judges — but they believe in judges. They believe in the execution of some kind of justice. Now, it may be wrong justice. They may acquit the guilty and condemn the innocent, but they believe in the concept of justice and the police force. And there are certain things that we all — even the modern man — think of as entirely wrong and that ought to be punished. God's holiness needs to be propitiated. The Israelites and the Philistines have treated the ark of the covenant (which is the representation of the presence of God) with contempt. They have treated God as a kind of plaything. They have treated God as a kind of talisman.

Now the problem of the solution of the Ekronites was that mice were unclean, and to send that back to God as a kind of offering to God was wrong on first principles. Had they consulted Jewish priests they would have known that. (The answer of course is a ram. What is it that propitiates the wrath of God? An unblemished ram...sacrificed...blood shed.) It was a picture, of course, in the time of the infancy of the church that awaited the coming of the Lord Jesus.

But what is it that propitiates the wrath of God? It's the blood of Jesus. It's the holy cross of Jesus Christ. It is the Son of God laying down His life on behalf of sinners.

“He was made sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be reckoned the righteousness of God in Him.”

How can God be just and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus? That's the great question, isn't it? How can God justify us and still be just? By meeting the demands of His justice, by meeting the demands of His law, by meeting the demands of His holiness upon His own dear Son.

“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and gave His only begotten Son as a propitiation for our sins.”

They sent the ark away.

They used crisis guidance. You know — if God does the unusual thing, then that must be guidance. God only guides when He does something that's bizarre, that's out of the ordinary. That was their view of guidance. Now any farmers here tonight will know — and any mother here will know — that two milk cows who have just given birth to two calves cannot be separated without a great deal of lowing. And their plan was that if the cows went back to their calves, this was not of God. This judgment, these tumors, this plague that had befallen them was not of God. But if these cows went in the direction of Beth-shemesh (which of course they did), then it must be of God. The fact that God overruled this silly view of guidance is part of the overruling sovereign providence of God, you understand.

Now Christians sometimes employ this mode of guidance. Gideon's fleece...if I had a penny for every time I've heard somebody say something about Gideon's fleece as a mode of guidance! You know, you do the unusual thing and if God blesses the extraordinary and unusual thing, then that must be guidance. The point of the story of Gideon's fleece is that it was a sign of Gideon's weakness, not of his faith. (I sort of knew that was going to happen!)

III. How can God be appeased?

But let me continue. This is the great question, isn't it? How can God be appeased? How can the wrath of God, how can the holiness of God be met? And the answer that this chapter does not answer of course is the New Testament. It's the coming of Jesus. It's the cross of Calvary. Yes, they asked a right question: How can God be appeased? And the answer...the answer which emblazons every page of the New Testament is that God appeases Himself by sending the costliest thing imaginable, His own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die for our sins, to bear our sins in His own body upon the tree.

Well, this cart comes first of all to Beth-shemesh. They react in verse 13 with joy, and then in verse 14 with a measure of reverence. They split the wood of the

cart. They offer the cows as a burnt offering [it ought to have been male cows and not milk cows that should have been offered as a burnt offering]. And then they did something that was rather strange. They set this ark of the covenant on a stone, and apparently not only did they set the ark of the covenant, but they also set these golden tumors and these golden mice. And it looks as though the reason why (verse 19) He struck 70 men because they looked upon the ark of the Lord is they gawked at it, they stared at it, it became a tourist attraction — ‘Come to Beth-shemesh and see this wondrous sight of the ark of the covenant, and these golden tumors and golden mice.’

Had the Israelites learnt their lesson? Apparently not. Apparently not. And so they asked the men of Kiriath-jearim [I would love to have been at the town meeting of Kiriath-jearim saying, “Shall we accept this gift of the ark of the covenant?”] But they did (7:1). They “...came and took up the ark of the Lord and brought it to the house of Abinadab on the hill. And they consecrated his son Eleazar to have charge of the ark of the Lord.” [And there it remained for twenty years.] “...Twenty years, and all of the house of Israel lamented after the Lord.”

Do you know how long it takes to learn to be contrite? Do you know how long it takes for the Israelites to learn, even after they have lost...? Remember, when the ark of the covenant was taken they lost 34,000 men in the battle. They still took some twenty years to learn to weep over their sins.

You see, modern man doesn't like this story. It bothers him. And the reason it bothers modern man is because modern man has no sense of sin. Modern man has no sense of the holiness of God. Modern man has no sense of the justice of God. Modern man has no sense of what grace is. You can't understand grace until you've understood sin, until you've understood justice, until you've understood holiness.

Do you remember that incident in Luke 13 when the disciples asked Jesus about the blood of Galileans? Under Pilate, when their blood was sprinkled and mingled with their sacrifices? And they're offended by it, and they bring up, you remember, the eighteen people who were killed because the Tower of Siloam fell. They're asking a very modern question: ‘How can God do that? How can God allow that kind of suffering to take place in the world if He's a God of love as you say He is?’ How can such things happen? Do you remember Jesus' response? “If you don't repent you will all likewise perish.” Jesus didn't say, you see, ‘I'm very sorry. It was an accident. God is busy. It's difficult running the universe. I know that My Father runs the universe, but it gets tiring, and He needs to take a nap.’ That isn't what Jesus said. He said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

My dear friends, this passage tonight brings us face to face with our greatest problem. Our greatest problem is ourselves. Our greatest problem is our hearts. Our greatest problem is our sin. Our greatest problem is that we have broken

God's commandments. Our greatest problem tonight is that we haven't faced up to the holiness of His character. God is so holy that He cannot even look upon sin. My friends, none of us can take that in. And the only way we can begin to take that in is the cost of our redemption. It took the blood of Jesus — it took the blood of Jesus! — to forgive us our sins.

My dear friends, there's a living author who has written a great hymn. It goes like this:

Great is the gospel of our glorious God,
where mercy met the anger of God's rod.
A penalty was paid and pardon bought,
and sinners lost at last to Him were brought.
Oh! Let the praises of my heart be Thine,
for Christ has died that I may call Him mine,
that I may sing with those who dwell above,
Adoring, praising Jesus, King of love.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, tonight we are face to face with Your holy character. You are of purer eyes than to behold any iniquity. How can we who are sinners stand in Your presence and not be consumed? We pray tonight for one another, that we might not just understand more of your holiness, but understand more of the beauty and cost of redeeming grace. Teach us afresh, O Lord, to appreciate all that You have done for us in the gospel. Now bless us, we pray, and hear us for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand; receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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