

Idolatry

“Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the LORD: for he is an holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good. And the people said unto Joshua, Nay; but we will serve the LORD.”

—*Joshua 24:19-21*

THE MERRIAM-WEBSTER

Online Dictionary defines idolatry as follows: “The worship of a physical object as a god; immoderate attachment or devotion to something.” In the New Testament, the Greek word translated idolatry, according to *Strong’s Concordance*, means: “Image worship (literally or figuratively).” Throughout the Bible, admonitions have been given to the people of God, both natural and spiritual Israelites, against the practice of idolatry.

As those striving to be footstep followers of Christ, it is appropriate to reflect upon some of God’s dealings with the nation of Israel, to the intent that we might be edified concerning our own course of conduct, as we desire to be pleasing to the Heavenly Father. The first of the Ten Commandments reads: “Thou shalt have no

other gods before me.” (Exod. 20:3) The thought here is that our Heavenly Father, through Moses, gave instructions that the Israelites were to recognize that only he was their God, and he alone should be so acknowledged. Given his manifestations of mercy towards them, the Israelites should have been obedient to this directive as a sign of their reverence for the Creator.

THE GOLDEN CALF

When Moses went into the mountain to receive the Law Covenant and did not return to the Israelites promptly, the people came to his brother, Aaron, to ask that a god be made for them to worship. The account of the golden calf is a familiar one, and the degree of depravity to which the Israelites fell, as recorded in that experience, is a shameful part of their history. (Exod. 32:1-6) After their marvelous deliverance out of Egypt by the hand of God, with great rapidity the Israelites turned to idolatrous worship because Moses was out of their sight. When Moses came down from the mountain and discovered this apostasy, he broke the two tablets of the Law, destroyed the golden calf which had been erected, and called upon the Levites to slay the rebellious leaders of this sinful idolatry.—vss. 15-28

In the remainder of the book of Exodus and continuing through Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, much is written concerning the Israelites' history, and the Covenant which God made through Moses as Israel's mediator. These writings contain the various laws which the people were to obey in order to receive continued blessings at the hands of the Heavenly Father. They also contained the

listing of punishments which would befall them if they failed to hearken unto God's words.

JOSHUA'S COUNSEL

Following the death of Moses, Joshua, Israel's new leader, gave the Israelites righteous counsel. Here is a portion of what is known as Joshua's farewell address: "Behold, I have divided unto you by lot these nations that remain, to be an inheritance for your tribes, from Jordan, with all the nations that I have cut off, even unto the great sea westward. And the LORD your God, he shall expel them from before you, and drive them from out of your sight; and ye shall possess their land, as the LORD your God hath promised unto you."—Josh. 23:4,5

Joshua then cautioned the people to be careful to follow all of the instructions which were recorded in the laws of Moses, and not to deviate from them in any particular. Most of all, they were to remember it was the LORD their God who fought for them, and they should manifest a continual love for him by being obedient to his commands. (vss. 6-11) One might have supposed that with all of the Heavenly Father's promises and provisions in helping them to obtain the land of promise, they would have been faithful in obeying his commands. However, such was not the case.

The Israelites had remained faithful to God during Joshua's lifetime, as the aged men of his generation had seen the wondrous miracles which the LORD had wrought on behalf of the people. (Judg. 2:7) However, when they died out, a new generation came forth who did not worship God in the same

way. They also did not care about the miracles which he had performed for Israel in the past. Worse still, they practiced many things which were expressly forbidden, including the worship of heathen gods and idols. As a result, the anger of the LORD came upon Israel and left them to the mercy of their enemies.—vss. 9-14

OLD TESTAMENT LESSON

One repeated theme characterized the period following the death of Joshua: “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Judg. 17:6) In order to get a glimpse into the depths of religious decay among the people during that period we will consider some of the experiences of a man named Micah who was of the tribe of Ephraim.—vss. 1-5

These verses state that Micah stole eleven hundred shekels of silver from his mother. She, not knowing who had taken them, cursed the thief. Micah, apparently hearing this, may have feared the results of this curse, and returned the silver to her. She then lifted the curse and blessed her son for returning the silver, which she then decided would be used for an idolatrous purpose. She took two hundred shekels of silver and had two idols made from them. Micah put these idols in a shrine along with his household gods, or terraphim, and decided to establish a priesthood for his family. He made an ephod and consecrated one of his sons to be his priest. This arrangement was completely contrary to God’s law. No one from the tribe of Ephraim could be a priest, since God had established that order expressly through the tribe of Levi.

Thus, we see the state of decadence which existed at that time. The stolen money from one's parent was used for idols, and God's name was invoked to bless the thief. Additionally, individual shrines were erected to replace the proper Tabernacle worship, and Micah's son, who was not of the family of Aaron, was consecrated as a priest. Through all of this, Micah seemingly imagined that God would bless these arrangements.

One of the reasons it is important for the Lord's consecrated people today to reflect upon the experiences of natural Israel is for the purpose of avoiding some of the mistakes they as a covenanted nation made. These mistakes proved very costly, eventually causing them, as a nation, to lose out on the privilege of becoming the spiritual seed of Abraham. For spiritual Israelites, the New Testament also addresses in numerous places the sin of idolatry. One such example is this statement from the Apostle John: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." (I John 5:21) Spiritual idolatry would be the supplanting of God in our worship by giving some person or object a higher degree of reverence or affection than the Heavenly Father. Such a course is in direct opposition to our vows of consecration to God, in which we have covenanted to do his will only, and to put the worship of him first in our lives.

In seeking to extract lessons for our consideration, the idolatrous practices of natural Israel were illustrative of the various examples of similar worship manifested by many who have professed to be followers of Christ throughout the centuries since his First Advent. Even today, with the increased

light of truth available during the present harvest period of the Gospel Age, idolatry can affect those striving to follow in the footsteps of the Master. Although there are many possible situations wherein idolatry could become a problem in our lives, we will discuss just six examples which could befall us if we are not diligent in adhering to God's Word.

THE DESIRE FOR WEALTH

High on the list of potential idols in our lives might be a desire for wealth, or those things which money can buy. The Master speaks about the deceitfulness of riches, and we are told by the Apostle Paul that the love of money is the root of all evil. (Matt. 13:22; I Tim. 6:10) The temptation to pursue personal possessions is one which needs to be thwarted if we are truly committed to the service of the Heavenly Father. This, of course, is not to say that the possession of means would necessarily cause the Lord's people to stumble. The Scriptures admonish that we are required to provide things needful and decent for those who are dependent upon us, and to fail to provide for one's own would be tantamount to denying the faith, making one worse than an unbeliever. (I Tim. 5:8) Passages such as this are absolutely correct, and not out of harmony with other texts of Scripture which stress the importance of not seeking after increased riches to lavish upon ourselves. Therefore, if we find ourselves motivated with a desire to increase our goods for the sake of self-gratification and beyond "things needful," then surely such feelings should be a red flag, signaling possible danger.

One of Jesus' parables is especially pointed in this connection. "He spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." (Luke 12:16-21) We should recognize that we are stewards of all that the Lord has provided for us. In giving an account at the end of our course, we want to be able to manifest that we were faithful in using everything in the Master's service to the best of our ability. For the child of God, to "build greater" barns for the purpose of storing an abundance of temporal goods is not acceptable in his sight.

RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS IDOLS

There is the possibility of a danger in creating an idol out of leaders in the Gospel ministry. "I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Rev. 19:10) It has been suggested that the Apostle John in this context represents, in particular, the members of the body of Christ living

at the end of the present Gospel Age. Applying this verse accordingly, we are thus admonished not to worship those used as messengers by God—those perhaps instrumental in nourishing us with God’s truth. We have appreciated the writings and labors of faithful brethren who have provided us with a clear understanding of the Bible. However, we should realize there may be a tendency—hence a danger—to worship the human instrumentalities more than the Creator who has used them in his service. We should value the faithful efforts of all who are engaged in the Lord’s service, but we should not exalt them as idols of worship.

The one worthy of our adoration and praise is the Heavenly Father, the Author of the plan of salvation. “In this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—Isa. 25:6-9

IDOLIZING FAMILY MEMBERS

It is possible to idolize our families. From a human standpoint, it is very understandable that one should have a deep love for and an interest in the

well-being of his or her family. The institution of marriage which God ordained clearly proclaims the great love which a husband and wife should have for each other, and by extension, for the members of their family unit. In support of this, we read the following: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh.”—Eph. 5:25-31

We have here the scripturally-given responsibility to love our family and provide for their needs. Nevertheless, our service to God and to Christ demands that we must put them first in our lives. In balancing these responsibilities, we must be obedient to the Scriptures which indicate what the proper course of discipleship should be for us as children of God. We are to obey the principles given to us by Jesus, when he said, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things [temporal necessities of self and family] shall be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:33) In approaching our responsibilities, there may at times appear to be a conflict between fulfilling our obligations to

God and that of meeting the needs of our family. In heeding the words of the Master, our reverence of the Heavenly Father, and obedience in putting him first, must be the determining factor regarding our activities, knowing that his providential care is over our temporal needs and those of our family.

PARTY SPIRIT AS AN IDOL

We could create an idol in the sense of adopting a party spirit. We note that various denominations and creeds of professed followers of Christ are championed, and their members identify themselves, according to the platform of beliefs which they promote. The Apostle Paul speaks in opposition to this concept, saying, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?"—I Cor. 1:10-13

The matter of divisions has been addressed on many occasions by the Lord's consecrated people. There are, in certain cases, legitimate reasons why a separation among the Lord's people is sometimes necessary. Nevertheless, to the extent we recognize one another as brethren under the headship of our Master, there should be no manifestation of a party spirit which would tend to prohibit the fellowship

of one member in the body of Christ with another. There should be ample room for all who can appreciate the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, to meet together for the mutual edification of one another, even when minor points are not viewed identically. There is a possibility of exercising a party spirit if, on the other hand, man-made barriers are erected where it is believed some consecrated brethren are unworthy of fellowship because of differences of viewpoint. This is contrary to the doctrine of the unity of the body spoken of by Paul.

COVETOUSNESS AS AN IDOL

Another idol is covetousness. "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." (Eph. 5:5) The Mosaic Law addressed the fact that the natural Israelite should not covet his neighbor's house, his neighbor's wife, or anything that is his neighbor's. (Exod. 20:17) Implicit in that commandment is that we should not be jealous of others because of what they have that we may not have. New Creatures guided by the Holy Spirit of love cannot covet anything which belongs to another. Jesus' words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," emphasize the generous spirit which should be welling up in the hearts of all God's people.—Acts 20:35

Those seeking to follow in the Master's footsteps will see that the spirit of service is the spirit of discipleship. Their desires should be to develop the fruits and graces of the Spirit, rather than coveting anything that would lead to self-exaltation.

A covetous spirit may be manifested even if it does not relate to material goods. There was contention which broke out among the disciples on Jesus' final night here on earth as to who would be the greatest among them. If such envy or jealousy, a sure mark of covetousness, should enter into a believer's heart because of a desire for recognition which has been given to another, there needs to be a cleansing of the mind and heart so the proper spirit of love and humility will be regained. "Love worketh no ill," and "is kind; [love] envieth not." (Rom. 13:10; I Cor. 13:4) To the extent that we can appreciate both the temporal and spiritual prosperity of others, and rejoice in their being blessed and used of God, we will have evidence that the idol of covetousness has not been erected in our hearts.

SELF—THE GREATEST IDOL

A final idol for consideration is self. The sinful tendencies of our fallen flesh are easily entrenched in the mind, in imaginations, and in thoughts. Sometimes it is a little pride, or selfishness, or the adherence to superstitions or false doctrines, which have been handed down which need to be discarded. Only the Holy Spirit and the influence of God's Word can cast down imaginations, ignorance, unholy ambitions, speculations, and every form of thought which would be detrimental to the New Creature's growth and development. High mindedness, caused by a desire to be recognized by others, to shine out among fellow creatures, to be well thought of, to receive the empty honors of the earth, to have influence, or to be held in esteem, either by the

world or the brethren, is part and parcel of the fallen nature. These must be striven against as we hearken unto the Word of God. In considering the cost of discipleship and the need to deny self as footstep followers of the Master, it is important to emulate his course while he was here on earth. Jesus' faithfulness in doing his Father's will resulted in his humiliation, even unto death—the death of the cross. His footstep followers who are similarly faithful in “taking up their cross,” will also experience the world's disdain, but will ultimately prove acceptable in God's sight, and receive exaltation “in due time.”

Here is another Old Testament admonition that is relevant to the followers of Christ even today. “Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen you the LORD, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.” (Josh. 24:22,23) Joshua recognized it would take great resolve and determination for the Israelites to truly forsake all other gods and worship the LORD exclusively. This was despite the fact that they had gained many victories over their enemies. However, there still remained adversaries around them to be conquered. Even as Joshua spoke to the Israelites in the foregoing passage, it appeared there were lingering inclinations towards idolatry. As spiritual Israelites, whether we have been in the narrow way a long time or a short while, the Adversary, as a roaring lion, is seeking to devour us, and we must be watchful if we are to overcome the influence of any idols that

may invade our consecrated lives. It is, therefore, a lifelong battle to conquer every tendency towards spiritual idolatry.

There were many admonitions given to natural Israel to render service to the LORD alone, and not to any other gods. Seeing that these illustrations were given as examples for spiritual Israel, we are forewarned that there are potential snares which could entrap us if we are not vigilant. These include a desire for material things or wealth, idolizing leaders among our fellowship whose labor and service we value, and idolizing members of our family because of our personal love for them. Manifesting a sense of party spirit towards a particular group of the Lord's people, demonstrating covetousness which can lead to envy or jealousy, and worshipping self which seeks to be exalted in the eyes of others—these all are to be avoided. Rather, let us always reverence the Creator only, and not any other creature, earthly treasure, or association, bearing in mind the following admonition: “Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.”—Ps. 29:2 ■