

# Idolatry

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For the past hundred years or so, the Bible has been under attack by a faction of liberal religious scholars that questions its authenticity. In the Old Testament, one of the books that these scholars most love to question is the book of Deuteronomy. They say that it was most likely written during the reign of Josiah, king of Judah.

The thought process that leads them to this conclusion is quite revealing. Uniformly, these scholars deny that God interacts with the world in supernatural ways. Many of them do not believe in God at all. As a result, they dismiss anything in the Bible that speaks of miracles or shows a supernatural power at work. This means that Deuteronomy is a problem for them, because it so accurately predicts the next thousand years of Israelite history after the death of Moses. To their way of thinking, such predictions are impossible, so they solve this problem by moving the composition of Deuteronomy to a time when most of the events it appears to predict are safely in the past.

To be blunt, friends, that's the height of intellectual dishonesty. They start off with an opinion and manipulate the facts to fit their opinion, instead of considering the facts and basing their opinion on those facts. In reality, the predictive nature of Deuteronomy is one of the strongest possible proofs for its authenticity, not reason to question it. Moses' ability to foresee Israelite history shows him to be the great man of God the text claims him to be.

One of the most important predictions that Moses made was his prediction of idolatry among the Israelite people. He warned them that temptations to idolatry would arise, and that if God's people didn't deal harshly with would-be idolaters, idolatry would overtake the nation and ultimately destroy it. In this, there's an important lesson for us as well. We aren't tempted to bow down to little bronze statues, but our world is filled with idolatry too. Let's learn from Moses how we can recognize these temptations and defeat them. Let's turn our attention to idolatry.

## The Basic Principle.

Let's begin this evening by considering the basic principle at work whenever any of God's people encounter idols. Moses lays this out in Deuteronomy 12:29-30. God's message here is simple. He tells His people that it is a certainty that they will encounter the temptation to worship idols. This was an especially great temptation because 99 percent of the people around the Israelites wouldn't have considered it a temptation at all. The Canaanites and the Egyptians were polytheistic, and when they heard of a new god, they just added him to the pantheon and worshiped him right along next to their old gods. However, the Israelites couldn't follow that custom, because God demanded all of their worship.

Today, the message is the same. We are surrounded by people who, even though they aren't literally idol-worshippers, are still basically polytheistic in their approach to life. They don't treat God as the number one priority of their existence. Instead, they put God on the same level as a whole bunch of other things, and sometimes even below other things. This can be a huge problem for us too. We must make sure that God, and God alone, is our only focus.

## Idols Today.

At first glance, it might not be clear how this works in our lives, so let's step away from Deuteronomy and examine some idols that tempt us today. The most obvious of these idols is the idol of **POSSESSIONS**. In fact, Paul explicitly identifies covetousness and materialism with idolatry in Colossians 3:5. Sadly, the world around us is filled with people who worship Mammon with far more zeal than many Christians worship God. The focus of their lives is the accumulation of stuff. They want the newest and best of everything, and they are willing to exhaust themselves working and go into debt up to their eyeballs just so they can have it. Of course, a day or two after each purchase, the new wears off, and they find that their new possession doesn't make them happy, but they never learn. They just go buy more.

We can be entrapped in this kind of idolatry and not even realize it. The only way for us to consider where we stand is to look at the way we live. What do we spend our days thinking about, God or the latest iPad? If we're willing to stand in line for six hours for the midnight rush when some new gadget goes on sale, are we willing to endure the same level of inconvenience to worship God and hear His word? Our lives tell the truth about what we really worship. If we don't put God in first place, ahead of all the stuff, we can be certain that He will have no place for us in heaven.

Another potential idol is the idol of **JOBS**. We see an instance of this in the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:17-18. Just like these men were so occupied with their business ventures that they had no time for the banquet, there are many today who are so caught up in their work that they have no time for Jesus. Of course, this calls for a slightly different analysis than our analysis of materialism. God does expect us to work, and if we aren't willing to work to support ourselves, we can't be pleasing to Him. Sometimes, the requirements of our employer will interfere with our ability to assemble or to serve the Lord in other ways, and I'm sure that our brethren from 2000 years ago who were slaves often found themselves in that same position. However, when we start giving more time to our employer than we

must, when our foremost goal becomes expanding our business or climbing the corporate ladder instead of serving God, that's when we begin to make an idol out of our work. Sometimes this happens because of covetousness; sometimes it happens because we've become workaholics, because we live for the satisfaction of doing what we do. I can understand that. As Lauren will tell you, I often get so fixated on what I'm doing that I'm miserable until I can finish it. However, that joy of doing must take second place in our lives to the joy of serving God. That's what He expects.

Third, it's easy for us to turn our **FAMILIES** into idols. Jesus tells us what He thinks of that in Matthew 10:37. Once again, families per se are not a bad thing. In fact, they're a blessing from God, one of our great consolations in this life. However, when family becomes more important than God, it shifts from a blessing to a trap. This can happen in any number of ways. We can make a practice of missing church services to spend time with our families, on family activities. We can allow the situations of our family members to twist the way we read Scripture, so that we now accept behavior that we formerly condemned as sinful. We can even allow our families to lead us away from the Lord, into some other religion or just into out-and-out irreligiosity. All of those things make the clear statement to God that family is first and He is second. If we continually make that choice, we establish that we are not worthy of the sacrifice of Jesus.

Finally, and most centrally, we can make an idol out of **SELF**. Jesus highlights the irony of this choice in Mark 8:34-35. If we make ourselves the focus of our existence, we will lose what we most value. The only way we can safeguard ourselves is by putting God first. Sadly, however, many people, and even many Christians, choose to put the self first. They serve no higher God than themselves, their pleasure, and their convenience. They're willing to go along with what God says, as long as it doesn't hurt too much, as long as it fits smoothly into the rest of their lives. However, when the Scripture asks them to give up some cherished pleasure because it's sinful, or they have to give up some recreation for themselves if they want to assemble with the saints, they aren't willing to do that. It's like they expect the upward call to lead them into a downhill bobsled run, where all they have to do is lean back and coast into heaven. Brethren, that's not what discipleship is about. Discipleship is about making tough choices, making sacrifices. It's about following in the footsteps of Jesus, who made the ultimate sacrifice. That's the only path that will lead us to heaven.

### **Temptations to Idolatry**

Now that we know what some of the foremost idols of our day are, we can go back to Deuteronomy and listen as Moses warns us about some of the ways that these temptations to idolatry will be introduced. First, he points to the possibility that **LEADERS**, whether spiritual or otherwise, can lead us into idolatry. Look with me at Deuteronomy 13:1-3. Basically, the devil was going to deploy a bunch of false prophets who were going to attempt to lure the Israelites into idolatry. Even though they don't necessarily operate in the same way, the idols of today have their share of false prophets too. This happens in our lives when we've got a supervisor at work who's always trying to get us to take on more workload, to give just a little bit more for the company, so that we find ourselves without any time or energy to give to the Lord. We see false prophets when we turn on the TV and watch an ad that promises us happiness if only we buy some product. We read the words of false prophets when we look at some advice columnist on the Internet who counsels us that what matters most is that we're happy, and if we have to get out of our marriages to be happy, that's what we need to do. There are many out there who will lead us astray from God to idols. We must listen to none of them.

Our **RELATIVES** can also be advocates for idolatry. Moses brings up this possibility in Deuteronomy 13:6-8. Our families can exert pressure on us in all sorts of different ways. It's easy for us to learn materialism from those closest to us. If we have a spouse who lives for the stuff that he or she can buy, and it's all they talk about, pretty soon we can start thinking that those things are most important too. Perhaps we're the primary breadwinner, and they demand that we work longer and longer hours so they can buy all the stuff they want. Perhaps they actually pit themselves against God directly. I know a man whose wife told him that she would divorce him if he didn't leave the Lord's church. Today, they're still together, but he's no longer faithful to his God, and I can't imagine a clearer example of idolatry than that. These problems are especially common in our lives when we're dealing with close family members who aren't Christians, but even those who are nominally disciples can lead us astray. We must make sure that their idols don't become ours.

Finally, we must beware of the idolatrous influence of **OTHERS**. Moses concludes with this category, in Deuteronomy 13:12-15. Even if we can't point to any specific person in our lives who is leading us to be idolatrous, our cultural setting generally encourages us to idolatry. The United States of today does not put God first, period, end of story, and the more we absorb the values of the world around us, the more we will be inclined toward that same disastrous viewpoint. The other day in the junior high class, I asked the students to make a list of all of the things that made someone popular or cool in the world's eyes. Then, we went through the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 and listed all the things there that made someone pleasing in God's eyes. There wasn't a single item that was on both lists, and many of the things that were on the world's list were the opposite of the things on God's list. Just like the Israelites were surrounded by idolaters, we are surrounded by idolaters too. If we just drift along spiritually, soon we will absorb their idolatrous ways. The only way to keep those thoughts out is by daily dedicating ourselves to be a people holy to the Lord.