

Christ or Idols

1 Samuel 12:19–24, Acts 14:8–18

Samuel was the last of the judges. It was while he was actively judging Israel that Israel asked for a king. God told Samuel not to take it personally; the people were not rejecting him, but God. When the people gathered at Gilgal to make Saul king, Samuel gave his farewell speech to the people, the last part of which we read this morning. He told the people, “Do not turn aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart. And do not turn aside; for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing.” Here, Samuel holds before the people two options: following the Lord, or going after idols. If the people followed the Lord, it would go well with them, as he reminded them a few verses earlier: “If you fear the LORD and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the LORD your God. However, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then the hand of the LORD will be against you, as it was against your fathers.” The bottom line (for the Israelites, and for us as well): serving the Lord brings happiness, prosperity, fulfillment, blessing and life; serving idols brings misery, shame and damnation.

The same lesson appears in our New Testament text for today. This time, it is not the coronation of a new king but the experience of missionaries Paul and Barnabas, in the city of Lystra, in what is now modern-day Turkey. Paul and Barnabas had been expelled from Antioch of Pisidia, where they had shaken off the dust of their feet as a witness against the unbelief of the Jews. Then they went to Iconium, where “a great multitude both of the Jews and of the Greeks believed” (Acts 14:1). But as we saw last week, the people of the city were divided. “The unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren.” The missionaries stuck it out for a while, but “when a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them,” then they fled to Lystra. So these two intrepid missionaries had been run out of two cities. One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, expecting different results. But Paul and Barnabas were not insane; they were faithful to their calling. The Holy Spirit had directed the church to set apart the two men to the work to which he was calling them. Their job was to faithfully execute their calling; it belonged to the Lord to protect them. Consider with me three points; first,

1. A divine miracle

Now, Paul and Barnabas are at Lystra. It was not a large city but a small country town. When the pair arrive, they encounter a certain lame man who had never walked. As Paul preached, his attention was drawn to this man. The man was

listening intently to what Paul had to say. The gospel was not just for those who were successful by the world's standards; it was for the handicapped as well. Here was a man who was not whole, not rich and successful, not a man who could become part of a church plant and from the get-go generously support the work of missions. Rather, here was a man who might have a continual need of diaconal support for the foreseeable future. But Paul and Barnabas did not pass by this pitiful man! As Paul observed him he saw that he had faith to be healed. Now the Bible tells us that "man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Only the Lord can look deep into the human heart and infallibly declare whether a particular individual has saving faith. But there was something on this suffering man's countenance that indicated that he was gladly receiving the good news, and Paul picked up on that. When the gospel is preached, there are two and only two responses: reception or rejection. When a person comes to understand that he is a sinner, without hope of eternal life apart from Christ, the only rational response is to say, "Lord Jesus, I am yours. Save me from my sins and make me your child. I dedicate my life to you." It is irrational to say, "No thanks. I don't need Christ. I'll work my way to heaven on my own." To do that is to be lost eternally.

The Scripture speaks of the lame man's "faith to be healed." The word for "healed" can also be translated *saved*; in fact, that is the more common translation of the word. The lame man at Lystra is a picture of all of us. He was without strength in his feet. He was lame. He had never walked. The voice of God came through his apostle, "Stand up straight on your feet!" There was no way, humanly speaking, that this man could ever possibly do that, but the command of God came with power. The lame man instantly leaped to his feet and walked. The townspeople knew right away that a powerful miracle had been wrought before their eyes. They knew the man. They knew that he was no actor, pre-planted, as has sometimes happened in so-called "healing services." They knew that what they saw with their own eyes was real. A lame man utterly lacking strength in his feet suddenly stood up—no, *leaped* up!—and walked. Sometimes, if I've been sitting in the same position for too long and suddenly get up, it takes me a few seconds to get my muscles limber and moving again. Perhaps I've been sitting for an hour, intent upon a project. Then I get up and walk into the kitchen, but my legs and feet don't work perfectly until I've taken a few steps. And I had been sitting for only an hour! The lame man of Lystra had never done anything *but* sit! As with the lame man at Jerusalem in Acts 3, here was a man that had never moved on his own. In the earlier case it was Peter who said to the lame man, "'In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.' And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them—walking, leaping, and

praising God.” The people who saw it knew that it was a miracle. They were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. So it was here in Lystra as well.

2. An idolatrous response

But the witnesses in Lystra were not Jews imbued with a biblical worldview. They were pagans. When they witnessed the miracle they weren’t filled with wonder and amazement at what God had done. Their first inclination was to attribute an evident miracle to their heathen idols. We read that “when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’ And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker.” The priest of Zeus, whose temple was in front of their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, intending to sacrifice with the multitudes. They called Barnabas *Zeus*—Jupiter, the chief god of the Roman state religion, originally a sky god associated with thunder and lightning. They called Paul *Hermes*—Mercury, the Roman god of eloquence, the herald and messenger of the gods. The townspeople were about to hold a pagan worship service, complete with animal sacrifices. But Paul and Barnabas would have none of that! They ran in among the crowd and tore their clothes as an expression of pain and sorrow and revulsion. They wanted no part of having caused an idolatrous bacchanal. They used the occasion to preach the truth: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them.” What they were saying was, “Don’t worship false gods that exist only in the human imagination; rather, worship the true God who is the Creator of all things.”

This must in all ages be the church’s message. Millions of people all around us believe in evolution, the theory that matter spontaneously arose from non-matter, and life from non-life—something that is utterly contrary to reason and experience. But the creation reveals the glory of a divine Creator who spoke the worlds into existence. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork.” The creation reveals the glory of God, but sinful man suppresses that knowledge. As Paul would write in Romans, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were

darkened.”¹ Unregenerate man plainly knows in his heart the truth about God, but he suppresses that knowledge, incurring God’s just wrath. Unless he repents of his sin and turns to Christ, he is condemned eternally.

The phrase “men with the same nature as you” means *of like feelings or affections*.² The word is used only one other time, in the book of James, where it says of Elijah, he “was a man subject to like passions as we are.” Our Acts 14 passage is used as a proof text for Westminster Confession of Faith 2.1, which states that “there is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or *passions*,” where “passions” is used in the sense of *strong and barely controllable emotions*. Men sometimes act rashly, in a fit of rage, barely able to control themselves. God, on the other hand, is always in perfect control of himself, and responds appropriately to the follies of man in every situation. He pours out his wrath in perfectly-measured doses, according as the case may warrant. Man’s emotions go up and down; he may feel high one day and low another day. On the other hand, God is unchanging. He does not experience inner emotional changes. He is constant in his perfections. When Paul and Barnabas said, “We also are men with the same nature as you,” they were emphasizing that they too were human, not divine, and did not deserve the worship that belongs to God only. In the very last chapter of the Bible the apostle John, out of gratitude for all the things that he had been shown, fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who had shown him the wonderful revelations. But the angel said to him, “See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. *Worship God.*” Christians are not to worship angels or men—even such great saints and role models as the apostle Peter or the Virgin Mary—let alone false idols which exist only in the human imagination. The angel’s terse advice to the apostle John is excellent advice for us all: “Worship God.” This is a universal principle applying in all times and places: our worship must be reserved for God alone. This brings us to point three,

3. Purity of worship

Even if a church sincerely intends to worship God alone, there is always the temptation to add unbiblical elements to the worship service. Our Confession of Faith, summarizing the teaching of Scripture, says that “the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, *under any visible representation*, or

¹ Romans 1:18–21 ESV

² James Strong, lexicon, ὁμοιοπαθής

any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”³ All true worship is defined by Scripture. And since God has nowhere by express command or by approved example taught us that we may worship him under any visible representation, we must not do that. To do that is to sin. The matter of how we worship is of great importance in the Bible. Man’s chief end—his chief and highest purpose—is to glorify God. This is the purpose for which we were made. God did not create man and place him on planet earth just so he could have a good time and find fulfillment. *Man* is not the measure of all things; *God* is. Man’s chief purpose is not to be happy or be free from pain or to live a life of self-fulfillment; man’s chief purpose is to glorify God. The apostle Paul expressed this plainly and unmistakably when he wrote, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do *all* to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). The little word “all” is all-inclusive. It includes everything that we do, every moment of every day. Is it your intention to do *all* things—everything—to the glory of God? If not, then you are an idolator; you are worshipping self of some other created thing, not God. As his creatures we are all responsible to love God with *all* our heart. Our whole heart is to be dedicated to God. If there is something else vying for our affection, and we tolerate that, then we are idolators. God will be no less pleased with us than he was with the children of Israel dancing around the golden calf. As we saw in our reading from the Heidelberg Catechism this morning, what God requires in the first commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” is “that I, not wanting to endanger my own salvation, avoid and shun all idolatry.” The second commandment is similar; when God says, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,” he is teaching us “that we in no way make any image of God nor worship him in any other way that has been commanded in God’s word.”⁴ To do any of these things is to violate two of the ten commandments, placed as the first and second commandments to underscore their importance. Isn’t it significant that God, in giving ten commandments to man as the summary of his will, devoted the first four commandments—fully 60% of the wording of the commandments—to our duty to himself, with only the last 40% of the wording devoted to our duty to our fellow man. Our duty to God comes first, before our duty to our fellow man. If we worship idols, we endanger our own salvation. God is dead-serious about this. Revelation 21:8 warns that “*idolaters*, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.”

Consider also how the apostle John closes his first epistle. He says, “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ.

³ 21.1

⁴ Heidelberg Catechism Q. 94, Q. 96, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 889–890

This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” His focus throughout 1 John has been Christ. He wants his people to know Christ, who with the Father is “the true God and eternal life.” He knows that the Israelites of old were so prone to be attracted by the idolatry of the heathen nations that surrounded them. He knows that even Christians are prone to idolatry. He wants the church to keep its focus on Christ—not the Christ of artistic images but the Christ of Scripture. So he warns us, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” The Byzantine texts end with the word “amen”: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” It is a strong statement. “Amen” means, among other things, *may I be eternally condemned if I am not telling the truth!* Yet many churches choose to ignore this apostolic command—Roman, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and others. Even independent churches which profess “No creed but the Bible” use purported pictures of Jesus in their worship spaces. People feel a certain emotional attachment to them. They would be offended if anyone would tell them that their pictures of Jesus ought to be taken down and destroyed. Why, that would be sacrilegious! Wouldn’t it be sacrilegious to destroy a picture of Christ? No, it would not! Rather, it would be an act of obedience to his word. We “know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” Pretended pictures of Jesus must go. It is the word of God that must be followed, not human traditions. The church of Jesus Christ at all times must keep itself from idols.

The Greek word εἶδωλον, *image, idol*, comes from εἶδος, *form, outward appearance*. Etymologically, it is related to our word *video*. Things that are seen have allure, they draw in the eye. Editors are always looking for outstanding photos to go along with articles or news stories. Images have appeal. Websites that have photos get the most attention. But as the apostle Paul reminds us, “the things which are *seen* are temporal; but the things which are *not seen* are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). It is the things that are not seen that are most important. When God gave his word, it was the naked word only, it did not come with photos. That was not simply due to the fact that the technology was not yet available. The technology for engraving the perfectly-formed Hebrew letters of the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone wasn’t yet available either, but that didn’t stop God. God delivered to Moses two tablets of stone with words formed by his very finger. He could just as well have provided photos, but he did not. He chose to deliver his word to his church in engraving (in the case of the Ten Commandments), in the spoken word, and through the inspired writings of the apostles and prophets—but he did not provide images. That was intentional. The Holy Scriptures are sufficient. Man cannot improve the Bible by adding illustrations to it. In like manner all the church’s worship must be derived from Holy Scripture. The church must never use images in worship, no matter how well intended. We must not consider ourselves

wiser than God. “In the beginning was the *word*” (John 1:1). The whole focus in a Christian worship service is on the Word.

It is significant, then, that both our Old and New Testament texts this morning hold before people two options: worship the true God or follow worthless idols. There is no third option—not worshipping God, but not worshipping idols.

1 Samuel: if you turn aside from serving the LORD with all your heart, then you are choosing to go after empty things that cannot profit or deliver—that is, save you from sin and usher you into God’s eternal kingdom.

Acts: It is your moral duty to turn away from useless idols and worship the living God, the Creator of all things.

Twice in 1 Samuel 12:21 the prophet Samuel describes idols as תהו, emptiness, the same word that God uses to describe the primeval world in Genesis 1:2, before he spoke the words “Let there be light.” If you worship idols—whether they be idolatrous images or the idols of self-fulfillment and happiness—then you are an idolater, not a Christian.

It’s a matter of the heart. Samuel says, “serve the LORD with all your heart.”⁵ He is simply reiterating God’s great command to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4, “thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine *heart*.” That is something that is utterly impossible for us to do apart from the grace of Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us, and sent his Holy Spirit to regenerate us, to transform us from darkness to light and to deliver us out of the kingdom of Satan into his own eternal kingdom. May God enable us all to love and worship him with all our heart, and keep ourselves from idols. Amen.

⁵ וְעַבְדְּתֶם אֶת־יְהוָה בְּכָל־לִבְבְּכֶם