

ENTER AT YOUR OWN REST

Studies in the Book of Joshua

“Full blessing in the Christian life is not bestowed except to eager, hungry people who press in to receive it”

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Text

Joshua 24:1-28

Topic

Joshua’s speech to the Israelites about idols and idolatry gets us thinking about the effect of false gods in our own lives

Title

“American Idolatry”

Joshua 24:23 Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the LORD God of Israel.

Introduction

Idolatry has been described as anything that occupies the place in your heart that Jesus ought to occupy.

If “anything can be an idol,” then isn’t *everything* is a potential problem?

Sure it is!

I came across a conversation between an American pastor and an East Indian woman. Surrounded by idols of stone and wood, at the shrine of a false god where animal sacrifices were being performed, the woman announced she was sickened by idolatry - in America. When asked to elaborate she said,

Your god is your stomach and you have restaurants everywhere. Your god is your sports teams and you build multimillion dollar stadiums to house them. Your god is your television and all of the chairs are lined up so that your family can gather around the altar and worship that god.

Specific examples like those might hit a few people but they run the risk of needlessly offending the majority of people. Just because you go to a ball game, or watch TV, it doesn't mean you're practicing American idolatry.

More importantly, if you quit doing those and other things it doesn't necessarily deal with the real issue. Put away the idols, Joshua said, but you must also "incline your heart unto the Lord..."

It is the inclination of your heart that needs attention. Since everything can be or become an idol we need to admit that the natural inclination of our heart is towards idolatry. We should therefore be vigilant about our natural inclination and replace it with a supernatural one towards the Lord.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 Admit That You Are Naturally Inclined Towards Serving Idols, and #2 Commit To Being Spiritually Inclined To Serving The Lord.

#1 Admit That You Are Naturally Inclined Towards Serving Idols (v1-23)

The apostle Paul told the new converts at Thessalonica that they had "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1:9).

Just because we're saved, however, it doesn't mean we're through with idolatry. The apostle John was talking to Christians when he said,

1 John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

Since anything can be or become an idol in my life, where do I begin to guard my heart against its natural inclinations?

Very simply put, I begin by admitting I am naturally inclined towards serving idols.

I say that because it's what our text highlights. Twice the people proclaim to Joshua that they have no intention of forsaking the Lord to serve idols (v16 & v21). But in verse twenty-three you learn that they were already

serving idols! When Joshua said, “put away the foreign gods which are among you,” he was busting them. Idolatry wasn’t just a potential problem; it was an on-going problem and they were slow to admit it.

I don’t want to fall into idolatry and neither do you. As we read through Joshua’s farewell address to the nation we can identify some spiritual helps that will get us admitting that our hearts are naturally inclined towards idolatry and, hopefully, keep us from falling into old habits.

Joshua began his address by rehearsing Israel’s history.

Joshua 24:1 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called for the elders of Israel, for their heads, for their judges, and for their officers; and they presented themselves before God.

Joshua’s choice of location for this talk was significant. Among the historic features of Shechem are two notable events:

1. It was at Shechem that God made His initial promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land (Genesis 12:6-7).
2. It was at Shechem that Jacob called upon his family to bring forth all their household idols so he could bury them and serve the Lord free from idolatry (Genesis 35:4).

The Israelites could not miss the significance of Shechem. They were in the land as promised Abraham. They must turn from idols as exemplified by Jacob.

For some of you these two experiences were simultaneous. You were saved and thus entered into the promises of God. You then turned to God from idols and eliminated from your life many things that occupied the place Jesus now occupied. It’s glorious - so long as those things aren’t allowed to creep back in and replace the Lord.

So our first encouragement would be to remember your Shechem.

Joshua 24:2 And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'Your fathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, dwelt on the other side of the River in old times; and they served other gods.

The father of the Jewish nation was a pagan idolater who received unexpected and unexplained grace from God. Whatever your earthly heritage, idolatry is in your blood. We were made in such a way that we must serve something or someone. If it's not God it is a 'god' whether it's an object, an idea, an ideal, or something else.

It's a reminder of the fact that our flesh, our human nature as it were, continues to tug at us after we've come to the Lord. We're in a struggle against it daily. Our flesh wants us to dethrone Jesus and put something or someone else on the throne of our lives.

Joshua 24:3 Then I took your father Abraham from the other side of the River, led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his descendants and gave him Isaac.

Joshua 24:4 To Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. To Esau I gave the mountains of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.

Joshua 24:5 Also I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt, according to what I did among them. Afterward I brought you out.

Joshua 24:6 'Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea.

Joshua 24:7 So they cried out to the Lord; and He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, brought the sea upon them, and covered them. And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt. Then you dwelt in the wilderness a long time.

This quick summary of their journey to the Promised Land has at its heart their deliverance from Egypt. Before delivering them God took on the gods of Egypt one-by-one as He sent the ten plagues. God destroyed their gods then displayed His mighty power by destroying Egypt's army.

Were you delivered from something when you got saved? Sure you were! Even if it wasn't something dramatic like an addiction you were delivered from self and selfishness. God showed you His mighty power over your Egypt.

Joshua 24:8 And I brought you into the land of the Amorites, who dwelt on the other side of the Jordan, and they fought with you. But I gave them into your hand, that you might possess their land, and I destroyed them from before you.

On their way to the Promised Land the Amorites refused to give the Israelites passage through their territory. Instead they attacked them (Numbers 21). The Israelites had recently left Egypt and were little more

than a band of former brickmakers. But God gave them victory over these fierce Amorite soldiers.

I think in some ways we are stronger spiritually at the beginning of our walk. We're more inclined to walk by faith and believe that God can and will overcome our enemies. That same power and childlike faith is available to us throughout our walk. Be encouraged to simply trust the Lord.

Joshua 24:9 Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose to make war against Israel, and sent and called Balaam the son of Beor to curse you.

Joshua 24:10 But I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he continued to bless you. So I delivered you out of his hand.

True, Balaam could not curse Israel. But he did advise Balak to send the Moabite women to the camp of Israel. The men of Israel began to consort with them bringing a plague from God upon their camp. It was stopped when Phinehas took a javelin and killed an Israelite man and the Moabite woman he was committing adultery with.

The Israelites would understand that though delivered from Egypt they would never be free from the temptations of the world. But they would also understand that bold biblical action would deliver them should they sin.

If you've walked with the Lord for a while you've fallen in to sin, fallen for temptation. But God has delivered you - or He can right now!

Joshua 24:11 Then you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho. And the men of Jericho fought against you - also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. But I delivered them into your hand.

Joshua 24:12 I sent the hornet before you which drove them out from before you, also the two kings of the Amorites, but not with your sword or with your bow.

The "hornet" is most likely a reference to the fear that gripped Israel's enemies as they saw the Jews marching upon them. Note the phrase, "not with your sword or with your bow." Their weapons were spiritual.

So, of course, are our weapons spiritual in nature. We live above our circumstances, not 'under' them. We can always gain victory over the flesh and therefore eliminate idols from our lives.

Joshua 24:13 I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.'

Israel's blessings were physical to represent the spiritual. Our blessings are spiritual to help us in the physical. The entire world is open to us to enjoy - so long as we don't let it usurp the place God ought to occupy. He's given us all things to enjoy; just don't become a slave to any thing.

In verses fourteen through twenty-two Joshua applies his sermon.

Joshua 24:14 "Now therefore, fear the Lord, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the Lord!

Joshua 24:15 And if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua 24:16 So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods;

Joshua 24:17 for the Lord our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we passed.

Joshua 24:18 And the Lord drove out from before us all the people, including the Amorites who dwelt in the land. We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God."

"Far be it from us." Yet it was right in their homes! It's a warning that the heart can be deceived.

Joshua 24:19 But Joshua said to the people, "You cannot serve the Lord, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins.

Admittedly the phrase "He will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins" is difficult to reconcile with the biblical fact that God is forgiving and gracious. Thankfully, Joshua defines exactly what he means in the next verse.

Joshua 24:20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after He has done you good."

God won't "forgive" them in the sense He will allow the earthly consequences of their sin to play out. Obviously He went on forgiving them as a nation; they remained His chosen people. But though spiritually forgiven, some things could not be undone.

It's the same with us. God can and will forgive us our sin. But often there are consequences that cannot be removed.

Joshua 24:21 And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the Lord!"

Joshua 24:22 So Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord for yourselves, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses!"

The people wanted to serve the Lord. So do we! Who wouldn't want to serve such an amazing, loving, gracious God?

Here comes the cut to their hearts:

Joshua 24:23 "Now therefore," he said, "put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord God of Israel."

Amazing! Until now you think this is a warning to them to not get involved with idols. **They already were practicing idolatry.**

So with us. We can already be practicing idolatry. Idol worship is an ever present danger and we can be doing it without admitting it.

Is there a person in your life... a possession... a passion... a pursuit... a position... that occupies too great a place? Don't be too quick to dismiss it. Let the Holy Spirit search your heart. Let Him find it and show it to you. Whatever it is it can never satisfy but it can harm you.

"Incline your heart to the Lord." The New Testament version of that is in Colossians 3:2 where you are told to "set your affection on things above" and not on the things of the earth (KJV).

A. T. Robertson writes: "The Christian is seeking heaven and is thinking heaven. His feet are upon the earth, but his head is with the stars. He is living like a citizen of heaven here on earth."

Adam Clarke writes:

Love heavenly things; study them; let your hearts be entirely engrossed by them. Now, that ye are converted to God, act in reference to heavenly things as ye did formerly in reference to those of earth; and vice versa. This is a very good general rule: "Be as much in earnest for heavenly and eternal things, as ye formerly were for those that are earthly and perishing.

It is a work of God's Spirit, taking God's Word, to identify the true inclination of your heart. Let Him have His work. Put away the idols.

#2 Commit To Being Spiritually Inclined To Serving The Lord

(v24-28)

At Ephesus in the New Testament there is an episode in which believers in Jesus Christ were moved by the preaching and power of the Gospel to bring forth their books of magical, cultic worship and burn them publicly. Believers did this - not nonbelievers.

It was a work of the Spirit on the inclination of their hearts. He can do the same today and everyday.

When He does He elicits a response from God's people:

Joshua 24:24 And the people said to Joshua, "The Lord our God we will serve, and His voice we will obey!"

Joshua 24:25 So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made for them a statute and an ordinance in Shechem.

Joshua 24:26 Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God. And he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.

Joshua 24:27 And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God."

Joshua 24:28 So Joshua let the people depart, each to his own inheritance.

In passing I'd like to say that archaeologists have discovered Shechem and even found a large limestone pillar they believe may have once been the "stone" Joshua wrote upon.

This is the ninth memorial Joshua has erected. Memorials, or what we might call traditions, can be helpful or hurtful. We need to evaluate and reevaluate them.

The Israelites made a verbal commitment to turn from idols and return to God.

Did they go home, bring out their idols and destroy them? I'd like to think that some did.

Before we "depart, each to our own inheritance" we ought to take a moment to respond to the Word of God.

Perhaps the Lord has been speaking to you this morning. There is something or someone that is competing for the affection the Lord deserves.

Admit it! Why strive against the Lord when He wants what is best for you?

Then commit yourself to Him. If it involves getting rid of something, do it. Idols can be actual things.

Chances are that the idolatry you'll identify is more a matter of where your heart is inclined. Commit to inclining your heart to the Lord.