6-23-24

Exodus 34:11-17

We have in these verses a very strong warning from God and some very specific actions to take. These words were given directly to Moses to give to the Israelites; but we would do well to take heed to them and understand that these things apply to our world and to our lives. The words were given right after the Israelites had sinned by making the golden calf. Now, their defense would have been that they were simply making an image to represent Yahweh. The problem being that they were then worshiping the statue; not Yahweh.

Hence, God finishes this section with “*You shall make for yourself no molten gods*.” It was apparent that God had to reiterate at least one of the ten commandments. God made it clear that there were to be no images made; even an image representing God Himself; because it would be the image that received the worship. He also makes it clear in many places in His word that He is a jealous God. While it is not usually good for us to be jealous, God can be because He is holy God and He rightfully deserves any and all worship.

Idolatry is often compared to adultery in the Bible; that’s what God considers it to be. Israel is espoused to God, we as Christians are espoused to Jesus; for us to worship anything or anyone else is cheating on our true spouse. And just as having our human spouse cheat on us would bring about anger, idolatry brings about God’s just wrath.

I realize that we don’t often see statues of gods or images that people worship so before I go on let me turn to the New Testament so we can get a handle on talking about these things. This is 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.

*Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?*

Much of what happens in the Old Testament in the physical, represents what takes place in the spiritual. There’s not much talk of demons in the Old Testament, but they are there. All the statues, all the gods they worshiped, had at least one demon associated with it. And all those demons still exist and are active. And they can affect us if we don’t keep our guard up; if we don’t keep putting on the armor of God.

So, besides His jealousy, God is also keeping His people away from the influence of demons. The people of ancient Israel may not have known they were there, but God did. Another lesson for us as to why we need to be obedient to God even if we don’t understand why. God doesn’t give us commands just to boss us around; He gives them because He loves us and He wants to protect us.

Paul lets us know that an idol itself is nothing. It is an object that has no power of its own. The Bible points out the absurdity of worshiping statues. A person who can afford to do so might make an idol out of gold or silver; still, he has to carry it around. It has to be fastened somehow to keep it from tottering and falling over. Someone who is poor might cut a log into sections. He picks one piece to have carved into something he worships, while the rest of it he uses in a fire to keep warm or cook his supper.

The idol itself is nothing, but as Paul points out, the demon associated with it is. And the demons can exert influence over whoever is worshiping the idol. This is why we have to be so careful that we don’t allow anything to become an idol to us. Once we have an idol, we are open to demonic influence. I don’t mean demonic possession; a true Christian sealed with the Holy Spirit cannot be possessed; but we can be influenced and made ineffective for the Kingdom of Christ.

A common example for us today is money. Jesus Himself named the spirit associated with money and it is called mammon. Money itself has no power; it is nothing but paper or metal. Money itself is not evil, it is neutral: it can be used for good or evil. But the powerful principality mammon is associated with it and if we are not careful to keep money in its place, mammon will control us at which point it becomes an idol. It can control us if we don’t have enough because we worry about it all the time; or it can control us if we have plenty since we worry about losing it all the time. Either way, it commands more of our thoughts than God does.

There are a number of idols or gods mentioned in the Bible and while most of them are gone, the demons associated with them are not. In our passage from Exodus, God specifically mentioned Asherim. That’s plural for Asherah. An Asherah was either a wooden pole or a tree that was associated with a female deity of fertility that would be the consort of whatever male god the people worshiped. They were common throughout Canaan land and the surrounding areas.

You won’t find the wooden poles around but the demon still exists and it is worshiped in the Roman Catholic church; they call it Mary. Mary the mother of Jesus is worthy of honor because of the honor God bestowed upon her; but she is not a god and she is not to be worshiped. She is a sinner saved by grace just like the rest of us. The worship of that demon is so prevalent that there have been manifestations of it in places like Lourds and Medjugorje.

The appearance of “Mary” in Medjugorje had blue eyes and claimed to be a judge along with Jesus. It is easy to see how false and how evil this is. Huge numbers of people have been deceived by this and make pilgrimages to these areas. Worship is taking place here and it is not worship of God. This is idolatry being committed by thousands of people each year.

Another commonly mentioned false god or idol is Molech. This is the idol to which the people would immolate their infant sons and daughters; often called “making them pass through the fire.” This is something so hideous that God said in Jeremiah 32:35 it was something “*which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin*.”

While we may not see a statue of Molech anymore there is no lack of abortion centers. The destruction of unborn children is still an offering to Molech; that demon is alive and hard at work. I see little reason for God to bless a nation that clings so tightly to this false god which brings about such an abomination.

My point being, once again, that these demons are not gone. The same ones that have plagued mankind during Old Testament times are the ones present when Jesus walked the earth and they are here now. We, as Christians, are protected by the Holy Spirit but we also have the responsibility to keep watch over ourselves so that we don’t go back into the demonic slavery of sin. And sin has dire consequences.

In our Exodus reading, God was very insistent that His people would not associate with the people of Canaan once they entered. This was important. The whole population was absolutely polluted with sin. They committed every conceivable abomination. In fact, they had filled up their measure of sin; God’s patience and mercy had reached their end. God knew that these people would turn His people astray so they were not to mingle with them.

If they did, Israel would eventually pick up their habits and way of life. They would start to worship their gods. If they intermarried, the women would seduce the men into idolatry and their children would be unholy. The Canaanites would not change; the Israelites would … and did.

There have been times in history where a small Bible-believing church merged with another church that was in theological error. The good intention of the Bible-believing church was to convert the church that erred. It never works; the evil always forces compromise and there can be no part of God’s word that can be compromised.

On a more individual scale we are warned not to be unevenly yoked. Don’t marry a non-Christian, you won’t change him. Don’t enter a business venture with a non-Christian; they will do things that are unethical and you’ll be stuck.

Along the same lines, God told His people to destroy any idols they found in the Promised Land. They were to burn them and smash them. Even if they were made of valuable gold or silver, they were to be destroyed and gotten rid of. They were not to keep it around even for a decoration; again, not because the idol was anything, but because of the demon associated with it.

Many years ago, I was at a museum. One of the displays was some artifacts from an ancient culture. On display was a smallish statue out in the open. The information placard said it was a fertility god and that people would touch it to be granted fertility. The public was invited to touch it. I watched as a young woman reached out and put her hand on its head. I’m sure that she didn’t even think deeply about it, she just did it. I will share with you that I felt an urge to touch the thing. Praise God, I did not. But I understand now that the demon associated with that statue was still there, drawing people to touch it. Although it may sound silly or trite, this would be putting faith or hope in something other than God in Christ.

I began thinking about these things on the trip we took to Arizona. Last week I mentioned getting to see the Grand Canyon that so demonstrated the glory of God. But where God’s glory is, satan is there trying to keep people from recognizing it. We traveled to a town called Sedona. It was surrounded by more of God’s magnificent creation. But I was somewhat dismayed at the focus of most of the shops in the town: they were concerned with new age and mysticism.

You could buy all kinds of crystals and candles and tarot cards and books on new age philosophies. Then I learned about what they called “vortexes”. I had never heard of these before so I had to look them up a little. Turns out that there are between 4 and 10 places around Sedona called “vortexes”.

These are places where you can have some kind of spiritual experience be it making you one with the universe or giving you introspection. You can go to these places and meditate and people do have actual emotional experiences. Well, I guess so. Demons can cause those things if you are open to them. Notice that they draw a person to nature or into themselves; never to Jesus.

That’s how you can tell the difference between godly spirits and satanic ones: the Holy Spirit or God’s angels will always point you to Christ; demonic spirits will point you anywhere but to Jesus.

So why is this area like this? Turns out that a branch of the Apachie Indians believes that area to be sacred. One of the main areas of a vortex is the specific site they come to each year to worship their gods. They are engaging in a pagan religion and they unknowingly are worshiping demons. Those demons are still there. And because the state of Arizona is embracing native American religion in the name of culture they have gained prominence. (No, I am not advocating getting rid of the native Americans.)

Thousands of people come there just to seek these vortexes out and engage in the new age culture. And lots of money is being made off of them. Remember that in Colossians 3:5 Paul equated greed with idolatry; and there is plenty of greed there.

Sometimes as Christians in America we are blind to how much paganism is around us. It seems impossible now that someone may worship an idol or be involved in some spiritual exercise that is ultimately demonic. But that is not the case. Satanism is widespread and involves tens of thousands of human sacrifices yearly. Witchcraft is quite prevalent in the United States and they are coming out into the open much more; and are being accepted. During the solstices and equinoxes groups of people get together to dance and worship nature. How many people show up at places like Stonehenge just to get in touch with the spirits there? All these poor people are leaving themselves wide open to the evil influence of satan.

I know of a high school that has a statue of their mascot, a bird, right outside the football players locker room. As the players head out for a game, they touch its head for good luck. This is idol worship. I bring these things up so that we are aware that satan is very active in preventing souls from coming to Christ; not simply through godlessness, but also through active involvement in pagan religion. I also want us to know that there is no level of engaging spiritual things outside of Christ that are harmless.

We can’t be playing with Ouija boards. Looking at horoscopes is not a good idea. Going to a circus fortune teller can cause you spiritual problems. Do you carry a rabbit’s foot; or a lucky coin; or have a lucky shirt? Throw it away. If you can’t, it has you.

Prayer

Precious Lord, we are so often blinded to the evil spiritual realities that surround us daily. It is so easy to miss since we are not used to these things being around us. They have increased in these last days, and we have not been aware.

Open our eyes and help us see what satan is doing. Help us to recognize how he is deceiving people around us. Give us then Lord, the desire to pray for them. They are trapped and they are eternally lost and only the light of Christ can lead them to life. May we reflect that light so they are drawn to You for salvation.

At the same time Lord, shine Your light on our own lives, so that we may see the dark places and the spiritual strongholds. Break down these strongholds; free us from any deception of satan that we have fallen victim to. Shape us into those living stones that You desire.

We praise You in Jesus’ name

Amen