

Idolatry

Book of Judges

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Bible Text: Judges 8:22-28

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If you would, look with me in your Bibles to judges 8 and I want to read from verse 22 down to verse 28 and speak with you on the subject of idolatry. Idolatry.

22 Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. 23 And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you. 24 And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) 25 And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a garment, and did cast therein every man the earrings of his prey. 26 And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold; beside ornaments, and collars, [or necklaces] and purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were about their camels' necks. 27 And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house. 28 Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon.

Now idolatry can take different forms. The most prevalent form perhaps for most people and we find quite clearly denounced in Scripture, is that which involves the worship of images. Actually, the word "idol" comes from the word "idea" and man has an idea of a God according to their imagination and they take that idea and represent it. They put it in a form that embodies that God and you can read down through history, you can read the Scriptures. There are many forms of deities that are physically represented in our races and cultures, such is idolatry. But there is more than just that. Again, coming back to the thought that idolatry is an idea. So just like any sin, it comes from within. It's out of the heart that corruption flows. It's not what's out here getting in here. We hear a lot of that. It's what's out here in the world which shapes what's in here. No, it's what's in here that shapes our view of what's out there in the world and affects our desires toward the things of the world. So that's important to see that there is a spiritual idolatry that the Scriptures

refer to as will-worship. You stop and think about what the number one idol of man is and it's himself. In fact, the word "idol" begins with the word I. When you consider that, that is fundamentally what drives everything that a man thinks. If God doesn't keep his hand on us, this depraved heart, with any sort of restraint, we'll be found to be wandering off again into idolatry. It never goes away.

Just as I read for you in 1 John 5 after that beautiful passage of Jesus Christ and who he is, the Son of God, eternal life and all that's declared there concerning Jesus Christ. What's the last words of first John 5? "My little children, flee idolatry." If it were not a reality, if it were not a truth, a danger, if you will, that we all must face, then we wouldn't find it commanded of those even that are the children of God. We would just say, "Well, it's out there in the world." No, even his as we sit here right now, if we're the Lord's chosen, redeemed ones, called by the Spirit, yet we know fundamentally that we continue to struggle with our number one idol which is ourself. So we need to be made aware of that.

All of that comes to play here in this portion in Judges 8 because here on the heels of this great victory of Gideon over these Midianites, we find some men with some good intentions seemingly. I would say on two parts: first, the men of Israel that are mentioned here in verse 22 coming to Gideon and saying to him, "Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy sons also." It sounds like a good thing. If you just read that in particular, you would think, "Why would he refuse? He's a judge. Why wouldn't he want to rule over them as a king?" So we're going to have to answer that but I believe in their desire and expression, idolatry was subtly raising its head. We're going to see why.

But secondly, you look at the end of this narrative and, again, it's seemingly innocent, seemingly good thing. "Bring the spoils from the enemy and let's make an object of worship unto the Lord." That's what an ephod is. It was used to consult. It was something that the priest wore that had the Urim and the Thummim in it and it was a way of consulting the Lord. That's what the purpose of the ephod was. So you stop and think, "Well, what was wrong with that?" Again, what is shown to break forth out of this is described there in verse 27, "All Israel went thither a whoring after it." They made it an idol.

So it's a warning to all of us that idolatry is not far from us whether it is elevating a man as they sought to do with Gideon or elevating an object or a thing or a history. I stop and think about how the Lord has been pleased to plant a Grace Church here in Shreveport but we dare not ever think that because this church is planted, it can never wander from the truth or apostatize. I think about every time we come and sit and open these doors, there's that danger of this self-will worship even if it's something as subtle as thinking ourselves better than somebody else because we're here and we're hearing the Gospel. Even that thought alone is idolatrous because what does the Scripture say? "Who hath made you to differ?" It raises its head in many ways when we become... There's the pride of race but there's a pride of grace which can subtly raise its head and we begin to think we're no longer vulnerable because somehow we've got the truth. Well, here's an example of why we need to be aware.

So, the very first thing that I want to bring out here as we come back down through this portion is that idolatry is the root of all sin. You stop and say, "Well, isn't it pride? Isn't it unbelief?" But at the root of all of it, pride and unbelief, is idolatry. It's self-worship. In fact, it began that way, didn't it? When you stop and think where was the first sin in rebellion committed? We go back to the Garden as far as man is concerned but you have to go back before the fall of man to the fall of Satan. If you look in Isaiah 14, what was the first sin? Well, it was among the angels and it's described here in Isaiah 14:12, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!" You think about how Satan goes about deceiving the nations as described in the book of Revelation. Yes, restrained on a chain, he can't do any more than what God gives him that authority but there are whole nations that are being deceived now by this very one that fell from heaven. Look at verse 13, "For thou hast said in thine heart," isn't that where it begins? "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds," and here it is, "I will be like the most High." So there is idolatry and, again, it begins with the word I. Look at how many times I is in there. "I," there is one, "will ascend into heaven. I will exalt my throne," there's two. "I will sit upon the mount of the congregation," there's three. "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds," there's four. "I will be like the most High."

It's that very same spirit when you go back even to the fall and you consider what was the root of Adam's fall? Well, look at it in Genesis 3 because this is the same Lucifer that we find here now subtly taking on and speaking through a serpent and what's the number one thing that is questioned in verse 1, Genesis 3, "Yea, hath God said?" What idolatry does, it puts self above God and considers self to be just as important as who God is and what he declares. "And the woman said," and you can see God had said, "You may eat of every fruit of the tree of the garden except for." What did Satan do? He took their eyes off of every tree and look how he put it in, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden." Even that is a perversion. God said, "You may eat of every tree except," but he turned around and said, "Oh, so you can't eat of every tree?" You can see how he is twisting the word of God and that's what idolatry does, it perverts the word of God. That's what we're going to see in regard to Gideon. God never gave Gideon commandment to go and make an ephod. That was something that pertained under the priesthood, that wasn't his role and yet, again, thinking that somehow they were going to make something good out of something evil, that's how the perversion begins. It begins to change and if the Lord doesn't restrain it, it will lead to condemnation.

Now, when we come back here to Judges 8:22, you say, "Well, what was wrong then with this desire or I will even go further and say demand of these men of Israel coming to Gideon when they said, 'Rule thou over us'?" That was a demand. It wasn't a request. They weren't coming hoping that he would agree. It was a demand. Well, what was wrong with that? Again, idolatry came subtly in the form of this demand because what these men were doing were looking around and seeing what other nations had and you look and see in this book of Judges even, the battle against the children of Israel came

from these kings that were established in these nations all around them. Again, the root of it was, "Now that all of these kings have been destroyed, why don't we establish our own king?" That was subtly what was in their demand and that's why Gideon came back and said, "I will not rule over you. Neither shall my son rule over you." Why? "The Lord shall rule over you." This nation was a theocracy. A theocracy is where God himself is that King and God himself raises up and puts down whom he will. He's the King. It's his kingdom. Men are not left to their whim and fancy to come up with their own ways of directing this kingdom.

So herein we see the idolatry because they began to have their eyes on Gideon rather than on the Lord and they were looking at the other nations as an example. This is the problem with apostasy in congregations today. A lot of what goes on and what's popular is cookie cut from - not from the word. Now stop and think about how simple and simplistic true worship is. It's something that over the years as the Lord has taught me the Gospel, I've endeavored to hold the reins even on this congregation or any that the Lord has put me in charge of or responsible for, that that congregation not deviate from the simplicity that is in Christ. And it starts with the leadership. It starts from behind this pulpit because you would not, maybe you wouldn't be surprised, you'd be surprised at how many different people come and talk to you about, "Why don't we do this this way? Why don't we do this that way? Don't you think we might at least kind of open up a little bit? Such-and-such down the street, So-and-so seems to be a great preacher over here. This is what they do in that congregation." And we have to constantly come back, I do, and encourage you to come back to this word, "What saith the Lord?" We don't take our ideas from other men or those around us no matter how good they appear to the world. You're going to find people that are in these other congregations that will question you about how you do certain things or why you don't do certain things. What do we have to come back to? This word. This word is given to us to be our guide.

So when Gideon said here, "The Lord shall rule over you," he's reminding them that there's only one that is the head of his church and his people and that's Christ. I'll tell you, if we're not looking to him alone, we're in trouble. Anyway that our minds and hearts and thoughts begin to look away from him, we get in trouble. This particular idolatry never died. It didn't die just because Gideon said, "I'm not going to rule over you and neither will my sons." This is Judges. If you look for over at 1 Samuel, chapter 8, and here's where I said that it's in our hearts. It's in men's hearts and unless the Lord restrains it, we would go the way of these others. Here in 1 Samuel 8, you notice in verse 1 that it says, "And it came to pass, when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel." Same thing, there are judges. The Lord has established even in his church, leadership roles: deacons, elders. These are ones that the Lord raises up to direct his church but in that, there is only one King. We're not making Christ King, he is the King. This was settled from eternity. In Psalm 2, the Father said, "I establish, I set my King in my holy hill. Hear him. Kiss the Son lest he be angry." There has ever only always been one King. But the problem is when those that have been given responsibility to look after his kingdom, his vineyard, however you want, Scripture uses different examples of it, whenever those become elevated in the minds and hearts of men, that's the full fruition of idolatry.

We see it here in 1 Samuel 8 as a parallel. Samuel and his sons were judges over Israel. "Now the name of his firstborn was Joel; and the name of his second, Abiah: they were judges in Beersheba. And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after lucre, and took bribes, and perverted judgment." Isn't that a form of idolatry? These ones began by their own practice to cause these others that followed them to do the same. "Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways," look at this, "now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us." Same spirit as Gideon. "And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them."

There are times when the Lord will give men over to their own reprobate thoughts and minds. When you stop and consider even the congregations that were established by the Apostle Paul and the other apostles in the early century. Where are they today? There came a time when just like here, different leaders were raised up and began to lead those congregations in another direction and the Lord just gave them up. He never gives up his true church, that which Christ has redeemed, but local congregations. You hate to think about it. I shudder even to think about it that there may be a day that people drive by here and no longer the Scripture is out on that sign, some fancy slogan. Somebody came in and subtly began to direct and deviate this congregation. But when I say that, you pray for me because I have the same heart just as anybody. If the Lord should ever take his hand off of me and cause my eyes to be turned away from Christ and him crucified, it doesn't take a generation for this whole thing to just be sold right on down the river. If he preserves a witness to his Son, it's to his glory and his honor. He's the one that has purposed to do it.

Here, the Lord has given them up. I can't think of any greater condemnation than that, that the Lord should give any one of us up to the desires of his heart, to follow after his heart and to demand a king other than the Lord Jesus alone. But that's what the Lord said to Samuel. "Go ahead and hearken unto their voice." It says, "According to all the works which they have done since the day I brought them up out of Egypt, even unto this day." Even there, the Lord is saying, "That idolatry, even bringing them out of Egypt, it never left them." There is the warning for all of us because we can say, "Well, I was drawn to Christ at such-and-such a time." Dear friends, even that can be false as we look at it. I'd better be being drawn to Christ right now. Scripture says to whom coming. As long as the Lord gives us breath, pray that he never stop drawing us because here the Lord said, "This isn't something new, Samuel. This has been since the day I brought them up out of Egypt, even unto this day." I fear many who even profess grace don't know the depths of the depravity of their own hearts. It's a profession. They've embraced a doctrine and yet they've never been shown the deceitfulness of their own heart that's desperately wicked. Who can know it? I fear when I hear someone proudly talking about, "Hey, I used to be this way and I used to do this back in false religion." It's something even that becomes

boastful. "That was my former religion." I'll tell you what, that former religion as long as you're alive, is still in your heart. It never goes away.

Notice here, "They have forsaken me and served other gods. So do they also unto thee." So as I said, the idolatry is the root of all sin but the second thing I'd have you considered, coming back here to Judges chapter 8 and moving on into verse 24 and following, is that idolatry is subtle. It's subtle. It's the root of all sin but it's subtle. Verse 24, perhaps with innocent and right intentions, Gideon here requests of the children of Israel their golden earrings from their spoils. These Ishmaelites, they were merchants, they traveled everywhere. The one thing they liked and craved was their gold and there's a little bit of a question as to what these were, earrings. We live in a society and you see people wearing earrings in their ears and nose and piercings. People act like that's something that's just come on in our generation. It's been around forever. It was a way that these flaunted their wealth, wearing it in a visible place where everybody could see it. So these nose rings, earrings, there is a little bit of a question as to what they were. We know they were ornaments and they were worn by both men and women in the East.

So something as simple as that sounds good. "Yeah, these are the spoils of the enemy, let's come and let's bring them and lay them at Gideon's feet." So that's what we see in verse 25. People willingly giving up these things. Not coveting them for themselves. When you look in verse 26, it was at an enormous cost. 1,700 shekels. I read somewhere where that is the equivalent of about 50 pounds in weight of gold. By today's standards, what it is today and, of course, it wasn't that back then but you're looking at over a million dollars of wealth being brought and dropped in a garment. This was a thing that was Achan's sin. He coveted these things that the Lord said, "You'll not touch. Don't touch the unclean thing." Even there it was subtle. He went and hid it and as a result, he and his entire family were condemned. But these willingly gave them up. We don't read about anybody here holding back. They willingly brought them and laid them at Gideon's feet.

You read on. Again, think of the subtleness of idolatry. There wasn't a person here that perceived any kind of wrong direction. There is nothing that the testimony of Scripture gives us that somehow Gideon had mal-intent. Especially when you read in verse 27 that he made an ephod of it. But now here comes the subtleness of what's going on here because as I said to you, an ephod, if you look at Exodus 28. Take a look with me there briefly, Exodus 28, verse 4. The ephod was part of the priestly garment and it was something that covered the front of the priest, the breast, in front and in the back. It's something that they wore over the shoulders and it was kept together by some kind of tie or girdle but it was a breastplate. Here it says in Exodus 28:4, "And these are the garments which they shall make; a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a brodered coat, a mitre, and a girdle: and they shall make holy garments for Aaron thy brother, and his sons, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office." Now can you begin to see where this subtleness of departure is taking place because Gideon wasn't one of these priests. It wasn't his responsibility to be making an ephod.

So again, where does this departure begin? Sometimes with a good idea. It could be something as simple as, "Why don't we set up a certain ornament that represents the cross or something in our place of worship." You think about crosses and where that began. Golden crosses and ornaments of religion today where those traditions, they didn't begin in the word. There's nowhere in Scripture that we're ever commanded to have a cross, whether wooden or golden or silver, either hanging in a place of worship, around a person's neck. But it's common practice today. It's the symbol of supposedly being a Christian. You think about pictures of Jesus. Somebody started with a good intention thinking, "We need to keep something visual before the people to remind them of who the Lord is." And so now come these pictures which today are rampant in places of worship. I'll tell you this, the only picture that I ever want to have of the Lord Jesus Christ is that which the Spirit takes from this word and impresses on this heart. Anything else is idolatry. The same thing with regard to the cross. The cross is no different than the wood that was burned up in the sacrifice. That's all. It's not the wood that is to be glorified. It's the one who hung on that tree and you cannot give any representation at all of who he is other than what's revealed right here in this word by the Spirit.

But this is how it begins. You think about even with what Gideon was doing here. Again, some say, "Well, I don't think he really intended for this to become an object of worship." Yes, but even in the good intentions, not only the idolatry of his heart but all those around him. It didn't take long even as we read here in Judges 8:27, "And all Israel went thither whoring after it." What the Lord commands and establishes, then we follow it so long as he does. But when he finishes with it and puts it away as he has with the law, as he has with the tabernacle, as he has with the priesthood, all these things were simply types for a season but we've got men today going back and trying to reestablish the law. Some dressing up, trying to dress up as close as they can to those old priests, carrying around little incense and going around and putting it in the air on the people. They can all in some way come back to the Bible and justify what they're doing. They say, "Well, this is why we're doing it. Right here, look at this verse." It's amazing to me. Even elevating water and baptism out of a portion of Scripture where it talks about that lame man that lay there next to the water and waited for an angel to come and stir the waters and be healed. They read that portion and it doesn't say that the Lord healed him through the water, the Lord passed that day, left all the rest in their idolatry but delivered that one and then went his way.

That's what he delivers us out of. Idolatry. You think about and if we had time, the brazen serpent where the Lord raised it up, commanded Moses to raise it up as an example of Christ. But what did they do with that brazen serpent? You know the history as well as I do, you can read it in the book of Kings. It was Hezekiah, after years, that took that brazen serpent and crushed it up because they had made an object of worship out of it. They had departed. Taking something, like here with Gideon, something that seemingly was good and yet the problem here was that God never commanded it. That's the thing I fear the most even with regards to my own heart that somehow, and people get ideas, they will bring them to you. Suggest that, "Well, maybe to correct this problem in the church and that, why don't we do this? Why don't we do that?" And the next thing you know, we're away from this word. Such is the subtle nature of idolatry.

You can see here in verse 27 and some people say, "Well, Gideon fell into idolatry." No, that's not what it says here. He established this ephod there in the city, in his own city, but "all Israel went thither a whoring after it" and it may be that even after Gideon was gone, it became more manifest but you can see which thing became "a snare unto Gideon and to his house." It indicates from that that even Gideon himself was brought to see that what he had done was an evil thing. That's the third point here on idolatry is that it's a snare. A snare is something that catches you unawares. When we sing that hymn,

"Pass me not, O gentle Savior,
Hear my humble cry.
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by."

I believe that we are brought to see that if the Lord should ever leave us to ourselves, we would be caught in the snare of our own idolatry and will-worship. In our heart, even as we sang in the first song, "Whiter than snow. Take every idol in my heart and remove it, Lord." David said that, "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts and see if there be any wicked way." It doesn't say wicked ways. Our flesh is what it is but that wicked way is that idolatry that will, that left to itself would seek to rival the glory of Christ. Lord, may it not be so.

But here it became a snare, not only to Gideon and to his family but to all of Israel and proved to be a ruin of many. But that being said, in conclusion, verse 28. We know that idolatry is in our hearts. You say, "Why am I still here? Why have I not followed the path of others?" Even as John wrote, "They went out from us because they were not of us." I'm thankful for those portions of Scripture like in the book of Hebrews where it says that we are not like those who fall away into perdition. Do we fall? Yeah. Do we wander? We're prone to wander. Lord, I feel it, to leave the one I love. "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way." That's that idolatry. But that's the Great Shepherd that keeps his sheep that have wandered from the fold. He knows his sheep. He's going to have everyone that he ever purchased and he is going to bring them safely back to the fold. That he has promised.

That's what I see here in verse 28. In spite of the idolatry, in spite of the rebellion, it says there, "Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon." That's the Lord's grace right there. When we can know in our own hearts as sinful and an idolatrous as we are by nature, that the Lord should keep us and give us rest. It's what he said, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." To have that quietness and rest under the kingship of Christ. There is no rest under the kingship of a man. All of us have at one time or another sat under church leaders that have ruled with a hard thumb and were very legalistic and demanding, lording it over you. There is no rest in that kind of direction or preaching. I prefer that the Lord be the King and that he direct his church and I'm just an underling. That's all I am. He's the Great Shepherd and I need him as much as anybody in this congregation. I need to hear

him as much as anybody I've ever preached for. If our eyes ever get off of Christ and onto a man, I don't care how much we respect that man. People always ask me, "Well, how did you hear the Gospel? Who did you...?" They want to know who did the preaching when you believed? That's not what's important. What's important that the Lord took his word and brought it home in this poor sinner's heart. He caused me to see I was lost and turn my eyes to Christ and that's my prayer. I don't know what that man is or what his standing is before the Lord. It may be that the Lord used him just for an instant for me and then cast him away. Who knows? I'm thankful my salvation is not tied to a man. Neither is yours. What I want to hear is not that I was converted under Ken Wimer's preaching. I don't want to hear that. I was converted under the Kingship of the Lord Jesus Christ because I was given to him from the foundation of the world and he came and shed his blood and earned a righteousness and established it and so satisfactory was that righteousness that God for Christ's sake imputed to me, this poor wretched sinner, that righteousness because there remained nothing else to put to my account but that righteousness. So complete was Christ's work and therein I rest. That's where true rest is. That's where true quietness is. May the Lord ever keep us there looking to him alone.