

## Adventures in the Wilderness: Temptation and Idols

Ex. 20:1-5; Num. 25:1-3    7/5/20

We're in the midst of preaching series- following the fledgling nation of Israel as it wanders through the desert wilderness for 40 years on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan. During that trip, God was forming them into a people who could withstand the challenges they would face in Canaan. But you may be wondering: Why would that possibly matter to us? Well, we've been in a kind of wilderness experience ourselves recently! We've left behind much of what is familiar and entered into a new way of living. Just look around the sanctuary! If you'd have told me six months ago that we'd be sitting in worship deliberately spaced apart, refraining from singing, and wearing masks, I wouldn't have believed you! We look like a convention of introverted bandits!

So, like those early Israelites, we are facing unsettling challenges, and we can learn from their experience. Last week we talked about the issue of how God guides us. This week we face a deeper challenge- the temptation to worship idols. Now you might think of idols as something that are only a problem in ancient or primitive civilizations, but we're going to see that there are plenty of contemporary idols on this wilderness journey of ours!

One of the challenges that the Hebrew people faced was developing an identity. After all, they had been slaves for 400 years, but God had something better in mind for them. So, God entered into a covenant with them, a covenant in which God promised to be their God- to protect and guide them. And God spelled out what he expected from them for their part of the covenant. Listen to these familiar words from Ex. 20. *Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup>I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup>you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or worship them; (Ex. 20:1-5a)*

The terms under which God enters into a covenant with Israel are clear: God demands exclusive loyalty from the Hebrew people. They are to have no other gods, and they are not to make physical representations of other gods or of the Lord himself. They are to worship and serve and pay homage to God alone. And this is for their own good and protection! You see, the other “gods” have no actual power to guide or protect anyone. They are just hunks of wood, stone, or metal! Putting trust and hope in those gods is futile and inevitably leads to disappointment and sorrow. God wants to spare them from that. And, because the character of these

gods often mirrors the worst of human character, following them usually results in actions that are contrary to what God expects from his creatures. For example, temple prostitution was widespread in pagan worship, and the sacrifice of children was required by some of these gods.

You would have thought that this requirement to be loyal to the Lord would have been fairly easy to obey. After all, God was providing them with food and water each day and guiding them through the wilderness. But the temptation to follow popular local gods, tangible gods that you could see and handle, proved too great for Israel time and time again. In fact, these words had barely been carved in stone when Moses found the people worshiping a golden calf they had fashioned! It was dealt with and God and the people moved on. We'll talk more about that incident later in the series.

But many years later, the problem still existed. Just as the people were preparing to finally enter the Promised Land, here's what happened. *While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to have sexual relations with the women of Moab. <sup>2</sup>These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. <sup>3</sup>Thus Israel yoked itself to the Baal of Peor, and the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel.* (Num. 25:1-3) This pattern would be repeated for hundreds of years. The people would follow the Lord for a while, and

then be sucked into the worship of other gods, particularly the god Baal, the Canaanite fertility god. They would break the covenant and their promise to be exclusively loyal to the Lord- much like an unfaithful husband or wife. Then, God would intervene with judgment, and the people would eventually return to following his ways. Repeat and recycle. This is the story of the Old Testament!

But, what does following Baal have to do with us in 21<sup>st</sup> century America? After all, we don't make idols and bow down to them. True, but an idol is anything other than God that we rely on to meet our basic needs- material needs, emotional needs, spiritual needs. And, it's much easier to put our trust in things we can see and control, than it is to trust in an unseen God whose ways we often can't understand. That's why John Calvin, the theological father of Presbyterians, said that the human heart is an idol-making factory! We just keep cranking out more and more of them!

Idols often begin with good things, things given to us by God for our comfort and enjoyment. They become idols when we give ultimate value to them. Here are a few common ones. See if they sound familiar to you! People can be idols for us. Think of the TV show "American Idol," which celebrates the celebrity culture in which we live. We put our trust in sports figures, musicians, politicians, and even religious celebrities. We buy their stuff, listen to them and watch them, contribute to their causes, and sing

their praises to others. Inevitably, they disappoint us, because- well, because they are human! They may (or may not) do wonderful things, but they don't deserve our ultimate trust and loyalty, because only God is worthy of that. The same thing goes for our family members, by the way- spouses, parents, grandparents or kids. They can greatly enrich our lives, but they are simply unable to bear the weight of meeting all our needs, because they were not designed to do so! Only God can do that.

Or, how about work? Or, school? Many people find their sense of identity in their work, and that's a problem, too. Tim Keller put it like this, "When you make your work your identity...If you're successful it destroys you because it goes to your head! If you're not successful it destroys you because it goes to your heart- it destroys your self-worth. (Trusting God) gives you an identity that's not in work or accomplishment, and that gives you insulation against the weather changes... Work is a great thing when it is a servant instead of a lord." Is work an idol for you? Is it your primary source of identity so that your sense of worth and value goes up and down with the bottom line or other measures of success?

Here's another idol- money, or the stuff we own. Money can do a lot of things for us. It can buy us a sense of security- having enough money to weather economic storms, or to buy various kinds of insurance, for example. We feel more secure against the unexpected. But it's often a

false sense of security, isn't it? Just think about the Pandemic! Money can't keep you from getting sick, can it? In addition, some of us use money to prop up our sense of worth. Wealth demonstrates that we are successful, that we know how to play the game of life, that we are important, perhaps even better than others. Of course, the problem here is that there are always others who have more stuff than us, driving us to obsessively accumulate more and more. And, there is that other problem; we can lose our wealth. Many of us have lost a lot since the beginning of the pandemic, and many of us lost a lot during the 2009 recession. Our money says, "In God We Trust," but most of us find ourselves trusting instead in our money to make us feel secure!

People, work, and money are all pretty common idols, things in which we put our faith to meet our basic needs, rather than trusting completely in the Lord. There's one more idol that seems important to mention on this 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend- patriotism or nationalism. The words "For God and Country" are etched into a church building nearby. That phrase always makes me nervous, because it puts God and country on the same level! They are not on the same level! As a college professor reminded my class, "God is not an American. He does not stand when we play the national anthem!" God is the God of all nations, but he does not serve the interests of any one nation.

For Christians, our ultimate loyalty does not belong to the United States of America; It belongs only to God. And we have a responsibility to critique our country when it strays from being what God has called us to be. That's what the prophets did to Israel throughout the Old Testament- they critiqued the ways in which Israel failed to live up to its ideals and covenant with God.

We are at just such a time in America, when we have been reminded through numerous horrific examples that we have not accomplished justice for all our citizens, especially for people of color. And it's not just a law enforcement issue. People of color are given prison sentences significantly longer than white people for the same crimes and are more likely to be sent to prison for crimes for which white people receive probation or suspended sentences. Having said that, studies have shown significant improvement in this regard over the last 20 years, which we should celebrate, but we must continue to work toward full justice for all. And racism affects our businesses, school, and local communities.

So, we can celebrate our country, its accomplishments, and its bounty. But we cannot put our ultimate trust in it, its political parties, or its institutions. We cannot gain our primary identity from it. (We are Christians first.) And we cannot put the interests of our country above all else. To do that is idolatry.