



The Very Real Danger of Idolatry

Ezekiel 8:1, 3b-7a, 9-10, 13-17a *In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me there. ...The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. Then he said to me, "Son of man, look toward the north." So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. And he said to me, "Son of man, do you see what they are doing—the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable."*

Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. ...And he said to me, "Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here." So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. ...Again, he said, "You will see them doing things that are even more detestable."

Then he brought me to the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD, and I saw women sitting there, mourning for Tammuz. He said to me, "Do you see this, son of man? You will see things that are even more detestable than this." He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs toward the temple of the LORD and their faces toward the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east. He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here?"

My friends, there is a little Pharisee inside each one of us. By that I mean that it is our natural tendency to think ourselves better than the people around us—to assume we're smarter, morally superior, more advanced and forward thinking. We minimize and overlook our faults and oversell our accomplishments. The fancy name that sociologists and psychologists give this perception is bias, and bias extends not only to ourselves as individuals but also to whatever groups we happen to be part of or identify with, our culture, and even the time period in which we live.

Often when we modern-day Christians living in in the West read a selection of Scripture like Ezekiel Chapter 8, our self-righteous bias instantly takes over. Here the Lord shows Ezekiel a vision of the idolatry that had taken over the public worship and the secret hearts of his people. There was an idol to Asherah, a Canaanite fertility goddess, which may have been something like a phallic symbol at the entrance to the Temple gate. The artwork plastering the inside walls was of unclean animals which the Lord had forbidden his people to eat or touch. Women were mourning for Tammuz, a Babylonian god whose annual "death" was said to bring about the onset

of fall, and in the inner court of the temple, which would have been their approximate equivalent to our modern-day worship sanctuary, men had their backs to God's house and were bowing down to the rising sun! We hear these things and indignation rises up in us and we want to say along with the Lord, "How detestable!" We lament and wonder how God's people could have possibly come to this? And the Pharisee in us turns up his or her nose and says, "I'm sure glad we're nothing like that! I'm nothing like that!"

But let's not be so quick to condemn Israel and exonerate ourselves! For one, this idolatry did not wholesale replace the worship of God overnight. It was something that seeped in alongside their history, their culture, their families, their worship and their hearts over the course of generations. We best ask ourselves: are we letting our culture shape us or is our goal to shape our culture through the word and truth and grace of God? What message are we communicating to our children when giving to gospel ministry is the first thing we cut when family finances are tight and worship is expected to budge whenever there's a conflict of schedules? The precedents and spiritual habits we sow now will have ramifications, will reap a harvest later and for generations to come!

Nor should we think that just because we don't see Christians bowing down to Buddha or worshiping the sun that then idolatry is no threat or has lost its pull on us. Such an assumption is dangerously naive when Sunday sports arenas are jam packed with screaming face-painted ultra-zealous fans but churches sit quiet and empty. We live in a time where Satan doesn't need a scandalously clad statue to draw away hearts and eyes, when popup ads can plaster the flatscreens in our homes with the vilest filth at the tap of a button. No, we are not immune to idolatry nor are we innocent of it! With the people of Judah we too stand corrupted and condemned and guilty of the detestable. We too need the Lord to show us his undeserved mercy, to cleanse our hearts by the sacrifice of Jesus and to draw our eyes to his cross and our families to worship at his feet.

Prayer: Sovereign Lord, you alone deserve my worship and praise. You deserve the wholehearted devotion of my mind and life. Open my eyes to see the idols all around me that daily draw my attention and demand my adoration. For Jesus' sake forgive my falling; lift me up in Christ; defend and direct me so you are and always remain my all in all. Amen.