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An Exposé of Idolatry

Ezekiel was written late in Ezekiel's life. It is a literary masterpiece with its content and flow are clearly organized that it might be of significant encouragement to the people of God in exile.

Thus far we have considered the first two sections of Ezekiel in which the prophet gave the exile of God an understanding of their calling as a servant of God, Ezekiel 1-4 and the why of the exile, Ezekiel 5-11. This third section, chapters 12-24, serves as a theodicy for the exile (a defense of God)! As you can see, it details multiple sins and violations of the people of God which warranted/demanded the disciplining hand of the Lord! As we sample Ezekiel, we find an exposé of the people's idolatry in Ezekiel 14.

The first epistle of John ends with this exhortation, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols.” (5:21) No doubt thinking of this, John Calvin wrote, “The human heart is an idol factory... Every one of us from our mother’s womb is an expert in inventing idols.” Idolatry is one of the most serious as well as one of the oldest sins in the Bible! When tempted by Satan to seek autonomy over submission to God (Genesis 3)- which is idolatry, our first parents chose the former! Tertullian wrote:

The principle crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry. For, although each single fault retains its own proper feature, although it is destined to judgment under its own proper name also, yet it is marked off under the general account of idolatry... Thus it comes to pass, that in idolatry all crimes are detected and in all crimes idolatry. (Thelwall, 1887, p. 61)

What is Idolatry? Idolatry occurs when we make anything a higher priority than God... when we give deference or devotion to anything above God (which is what Adam and Eve did) when we place anything in our lives before God!

God gave this command to His people, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them...” Exodus 20:4-5a. - Idolatry occurs when we worship/serve anything or anyone other than God!

Paul put it this way: “Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry” (Colossians 3:5).

What is idolatry? It is “greed” which is an inordinate longing for more- more wealth, power, a better position, and the like! Idolatry occurs when God is not enough! Samuel told Saul, “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry” (1 Samuel 15:23a). What is “insubordination”? It is rebellion against God’s authority (~Genesis 3)!

Throughout the word of God, we frequently are warned against the sin of idolatry (over 140 times!) God exhorted His people at the beginning of the Theocracy, “Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten gods; I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:4). Jonah cautioned, “Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness” (Jonah 2:8). Paul said, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). One of the last warnings John gave the church was, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

Yet sadly, the history of God’s people indicates that they did NOT heed the Lord’s command. Throughout redemptive history God’s people prized and elevated so many things above God! In fact, it was this sin which sticks out in Ezekiel. We might think that the sin of idolatry would have been cast off when the nation was cast off in exile; surely they learned their lesson! But

they didn't! More than any Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel exhorted and warned God's people about idolatry; 42 times (Isaiah references it 17 times and Jeremiah 10 times)!

Accordingly, in our section where God gave a list detailing the sins of the people which necessitated the exile, the sin of Idolatry holds a prominent position. In fact, there is no question that Ezekiel patterned our text after Ezekiel 8-11!¹ At some point in Ezekiel's ministry, some elders came before the prophet, as was their habit, seeking an answer from him on a certain issue.² What they received was far from an answer! God told Ezekiel, as if sharing His own private thoughts, "Son of man, these men [notice the contempt here; obviously their idolatry is well advanced!] have set up their idols in their hearts..." (Ezekiel 14:3a). We have considered the essential nature of Idolatry on other occasions. Here we see it quite plainly... Idolatry is rooted and grounded in the heart. This is important for us to understand. See, when we think of idolatry, we tend to think of the native in the deepest, darkest jungles of Africa bowing down to a graven image. That in our minds is idolatry! YET you must understand that physically bowing before an idol is the *final expression* of the sin, NOT *its beginning!*... Recall the words of A. W. Tozer:

Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration, and that civilized peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him. It begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place. (Tozer, 2009, pp. 11-12)

That is exactly what we learn from Ezekiel in this text. The elders seated before this prophet would not have considered themselves as idolaters, nor could any for that matter have accused them of idolatry from merely their external actions.³ *These were the spiritual leaders of Judaism!* Yet God saw their heart (1 Samuel 16:7)! And what He saw when He looked at these men disgusted Him! They had "set up idols in their hearts!"

Idolatry is a heart issue! This is so important for us because as "sophisticated" Americans we tend to view ourselves as above idolatry. We would never bow before a graven image! And so we arrogantly think that we are above this sin. Yet the sheer magnitude of warnings in the Bible against this sin ought to sober us!

If John and Paul felt the need to exhort the first century church (which witnessed Christ in the flesh) to flee from idolatry, you can be sure this is a sin we all are subject to! If the essence/basis of the first sin was idolatry (cf. again Genesis 3), you can be sure that every sin we commit involves an aberrant/misplaced deference, a choosing of the creature over the Creator! So indeed, "guard your heart"!

Now as this sin "...begins in the mind and may be present where no overt act of worship has taken place,"⁴ addressing it will NOT simply be a matter of changing one's actions; it will be about a change in one's heart.

Jeremiah 13:23, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? *Then* you also can do good who are accustomed to doing evil."

As Christians, we have the idea that we can change our behavior any time we wish. That is folly! Sin is bound up in the heart. The only way to change our behavior is through a changed heart which comes by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit! Accordingly, if you and I would avoid idolatry, we must fall to our knees and appeal to God to change us- our minds, thoughts, and inclinations! Otherwise, we may very well look "clean on the outside," BUT inside be filled with "dead man's bones" (cf. Matthew 23:27)!

Idolatry continues with our entertaining of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.

Ezekiel 14:3, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts..."

If we think about this statement from the perspective of our culture, we will misunderstand the nature of God's indictment here. According to Jewish understanding, "the heart" was the seat of the mind (it was the bowels that were the seat of emotion; the head was viewed as that which represented the entire person). Accordingly, for God to root the people's idolatry to "their heart" indicates that their idolatry consisted of a flaw in their thinking about God! And that is exactly what we see in Ezekiel.

Like us the elders seated before Ezekiel would NOT have considered themselves idolaters. Yet as I just said, God looks at the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). And when God looked upon these men, He knew that they were guilty of the grossest form of idolatry, for their view of God was flawed!

Ezekiel 8:12, "Then He said to me, 'Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? FOR THEY SAY [this was the beginning of their idolatry], "The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land."'"

The elders before Ezekiel were not bowing before graven images! RATHER they had arrived at some awful conclusions about God:

1. "The Lord does not see" which means *God no longer cares about His people*, and
2. "The Lord has forsaken the land" which means *God no longer was faithful to His covenant promises!*

This was the essence of the idolatry of God's people at this time. It was from this that their moral, cultural, and national rebellion arose! Listen further to Tozer's treatment on idolatry:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever

been greater than its idea of God. Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God.

For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like... Always the most revealing thing about the Church is her idea of God, just as her most significant message is what she says about Him or leaves unsaid, for her silence is often more eloquent than her speech. She can never escape the self-disclosure of her witness concerning God.

Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes into your mind when you think about God?' we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. (Tozer, 2009, pp. 9, 12 emphasis added)

Clearly, it is NOT enough to profess right doctrine; WE MUST BELIEVE WHAT WE PROFESS! It is NOT enough to profess that God is love, sovereign, or holy; WE MUST BELIEVE WHAT WE PROFESS!

Christian, let us be warned! Idolatry NOT ONLY begins in the heart, BUT It consists of incorrect thoughts about God! Think of it. If you and I truly believed "God no longer saw us" (we doubted His love) and that He had "forsaken the land" (He wasn't faithful to His promises), how would that impact our living? We probably don't need to think long on the matter as most if not all of us in this room at times have felt unloved or have been disappointed by God.

Now, I'm NOT suggesting that we fake it when it comes to our relationship with God and so be phony. If you feel unloved and disappointed in your relationship with God, you need to go before the Lord and confess that. But also recognize that these two thoughts — which are quite common in the church today — are themselves idolatrous! Accordingly, if we arrive at one or both of these conclusions, understand it is a big deal! Don't live very long in your Christian life sporting such thoughts about God!

We need to heed this exhortation! Is it at all ironic to you that one of the key exhortations God gave His people in exile at this time was a warning about idolatry? Being an exile is NOT easy! Living in a world hostile to Christ (and so us) will be difficult! In fact, because of the hostile world in which we live, at times it will be easy to feel that God doesn't care about us! Based on our trials and difficulties, He somehow has forsaken His commitment to bless us. Think of where Israel was when Ezekiel penned this epistle! They were pilgrim people and pilgrim people need to understand that THE primary battle they face in exile will NOT be safety, security, or provisional concerns, BUT the question: "Will you continue to serve a God who in His providence has brought you into the desert?"

Idolatry ends with ignoble thoughts about God acted upon.

Ezekiel 14:3b, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, AND [SO]

have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity..."

It is difficult to understand what this latter expression means, but it indicates that our lives will reflect our corrupted hearts! This is such an important link! The ignoble thoughts that these elders had when it came to God had a direct impact on their living...

Proverbs 23:7, "For as [a man] thinks within himself, so he is..."

It was NOT that the elders had household idols OR had abandoned Judaism. RATHER, it is that their erroneous thinking about God (which spread like gangrene amongst the exiles) led to broken living!

Ezekiel 9:9, "Then He said to me, 'The iniquity of the house of Israel and Judah is very, very great, and the land is filled with blood, and the city is full of perversion [Why?]; FOR THEY SAY, "The LORD has forsaken the land, and the LORD does not see!"'"

The community violations of love and care for the needy AND the worship standards that God gave to His people in Leviticus were compromised *BECAUSE* of their faulty view of God! In our exile it is so important that we understand this!

Psalm 115:4, 8, God said, "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of man's hands... Those who make them will become like them, everyone who trusts in them."

This reflects a universal truth when it comes to mankind: we always will attain and so reflect the image of what we worship!

Proverbs 27:19, "As in water face *reflects* face, so the heart of man *reflects* man."

If in your heart you worship a passive god, in time you will become passive!

Luke 6:45, "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil *man* out of the evil *treasure* brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart."

Regardless of what these elders may have said, their deeds reflected the allegiance of their heart, an allegiance which clearly was NOT God, BUT themselves!

I want to give you a diagnostic tool when it comes to this sin in our lives, however it comes with a caveat: you must use this tool only in examining your walk with Christ over the long haul. If you use the tool gazing back upon this past week, month, and even year, you may be rather discouraged. The diagnostic tool helps us consider the bigger picture of our Christian life. With that, let me ask you: How is your orthodoxy? Do you hold to erroneous doctrines? Are you in error in your profession of Christ?

I dare say very few of us would think that this is true of us! To answer these questions, we must NOT consult our minds or our doctrinal creeds, BUT look at our living. If that which we worship is reflected in our actions, then we need only look at our actions to behold what we worship!

- Do you believe God is kind? To answer this all I need to do is see if you are kind!
- Do you believe God patient? That's easy, are you patient?
- Is God holy? We need only ask ourselves, "Do I flirt with sin?"
- Do you believe that God suffers long in the face of injustice? Do you?

Your answer when it comes to your living will be a good indication of what god you have been worshipping in your life!

In this context, it ought to be of chief concern to us that Presbyterians at times called the frozen chosen and that those who hold to Reformed theology at times are associated with dead orthodoxy!

If our orthodoxy is NOT passionate for the Lord, THEN there is no question the god we are worshipping is NOT the God of the Bible! It behooves us to heed the exhortation of John...

1 John 5:21, "Little children, guard yourselves from idols."

If you suspect that a portion of your Christianity is subject to idolatry, do NOT be discouraged! BUT do something about it!

- Begin with confession. Confess your sin to the Lord; He will heal you!
- Then ask God to remove the idols from your life!
- Seek Christ way before seeking your rights, privileges, and pleasures!
- And strive in your life to reflect the God of the Bible!

Works Cited

Thelwall, T. b. (1887). On Idolatry. In a. J. Alexander Roberts, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. New York: The Christian Literature Publishing Company.

Tozer, A. W. (2009). *The Knowledge of the Holy*. New York: Harper One.

End Note(s)

¹ D. I. Block wrote, "Although 14:1–11 is obviously much shorter than 8:1–11:25, the parallels in the sequences of events described are remarkable:

- a. A delegation of elders from the exilic community appears before Ezekiel (8:1; 14:1), without explanation for their presence in the narrative introduction.
- b. The presence of the elders apparently precipitates a divine response (8:1ff.; 14:2ff.).
- c. The first part of the response is intended for the prophet's own consumption (8:1–18; 14:3).

- d. The response includes an analysis of the spiritual condition of the people represented by the delegates. In 8:5–17 the presentation takes the form of a visionary tour of the temple; in 14:3 it consists of a simple auditory declaration.
- e. Idolatry is presented as the Israelites' fundamental problem. In 8:5–17 the idols are external, localized in the temple; in 14:3 they have been internalized, in the heart.
- f. The analysis is followed by a reference to Yahweh's response, though the form of that response differs. In 8:17 Yahweh declares that even if the people cry in his ears he will not listen. In 14:3b Yahweh poses a rhetorical question, whether he should respond to those who have appeared before Ezekiel for a word from him. In the event, he does respond, but not in accordance with their wishes.
- g. The divine resolve is expressed in announcements of judgment on the wicked. Again the first is given in visionary form (9:1–11); the second is auditory (14:4–11). However, both seem to hold out the possibility that persons who are sensitive to sin can escape the judgment (9:4; 14:6).

These structural correspondences bear witness to a conscious editorial effort to correlate external aspects of Ezekiel's life within the community with his internal prophetic experiences. They also display an awareness of the connection between the manner in which the people attempted to relate to God and the way in which he reasoned." (*The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24*, NICOT, pp. 422–423)

² We'll talk about what this means next time.

³ J. B. Taylor wrote, "Nothing had changed outwardly in their allegiance to the Lord, but they had taken idols into their hearts and in so doing they had put in front of their own faces the stumbling-block which would cause them to fall into iniquity." (*Ezekiel*, TOTC, p. 126)

⁴ Cf. above the Tozer quote.