

**“Fighting Idolatry”**  
**Deuteronomy 13:1-18**  
**March 9, 2014**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Deuteronomy 13 continues to explain what is involved in the first commandment, a commandment requiring the worship of Israel’s God, Jehovah, to the exclusion of all other gods. **“You shall have no other gods before me”** (Deut. 5:7). In the previous chapter that we studied last week, Moses says that this means they must both destroy all the idolatry they find in Canaan when they come into the land, as well as making sure they don’t follow the worship practices of the Canaanites who lived there before them. In today’s chapter, he moves to address the threat to this commandment that comes not from some other people, but from within Israel itself. He envisions three scenarios that follow the same pattern. A person or group of people in a position of influence uses that influence to encourage the worship of other gods. Israel is then commanded to respond to this situation by putting to death those who are seeking to influence them into idolatry, even if the bad influence is a member of one’s own family.

We talked last week about the challenge the first commandment offers to the religious pluralism of our day. Pluralism says that all religious paths are valid ways to God. If this passage is read with that assumption, it feels way too harsh. It’s like the news account that appeared this week of the arrest of the 67 students from the Indian state of Kashmir. They were charged with sedition. What did they do? They cheered for the Pakistani cricket team in their match against the Indian team. Many people read this passage as if God is doing the same thing here, imposing an overly harsh penalty because someone chooses a god of which he doesn’t approve.

It’s not just religious pluralists who have problems with this passage. Many Christians also see it as overly harsh, coming from an Old Testament God who has been permanently silenced by the gentler God of the New Testament. To read this text in this way is to misread it seriously, with tragic consequences. Without question this is a hard text, commanding the execution of those who influence others to abandon the true God, even when they are members of one’s own family. But if we reject the passages we don’t like, we are simply replacing God’s authority with our own. So we must read this text in such a way that we receive it and allow it to challenge us. We are going to do so now by exploring in more depth what it teaches us about fighting idolatry.

**I. Why Do We Fight Idolatry?**

There are at least two reasons given here for engaging the fight against idolatry. The first is because of what is at stake. The stakes could not be higher. The violation of the first commandment terminates a relationship with God. That can be seen most clearly in the third scenario in which an entire town has been drawn away to serve other gods. Leadership positions are gained by those who are called “worthless fellows” (v. 13), and they lead the inhabitants of the entire town to abandon the true God for false gods. When we read that term, “worthless fellows,” we tend to think of unshaven, unbathed, poorly dressed and crude people. But they were actually the leaders of their town, men who had gained enough respect from the citizens of the town to have ascended to positions of influence and leadership. They would have been seen as the leading citizens of the town. But they are worthless because they use their leadership to lead the people away from God. The result of that is the judgment of God, seen in the total destruction that was commanded of the Canaanite people living in the land before Israel took possession of it. This total destruction is a picture of the final judgment. So what is at stake in this fight against idolatry is eternal condemnation.

Let’s bring this closer to home. Those who study religious trends in our nation have pointed out how it is not uncommon for young people growing up in the church to leave the church when they leave home. Historically, the vast majority of them return to the church when they settle down into full adulthood. But a new trend has been developing recently in that increasing numbers of young people leaving the church are not returning later in life. They are leaving and staying away, from the church and from the Lord. That’s what’s at stake in this.

It is only when we see what’s at stake that we can put this passage in its proper context. Those who lead others into this kind of idolatry are guilty of the equivalent of treason. Their idolatrous behavior is leading others into destruction. To urge peaceful coexistence with people whose influence is so destructive is foolish. The black mamba snake is found throughout many parts of Africa. It is a highly aggressive snake that happens to be the fastest land snake in the world. Its venom is among the most potent of all poisonous snakes, with the venom released in one bite capable of killing 10-25 adults. If you knew there was a black mamba living in your house, would you urge peaceful coexistence? Would you send your children into the house? We would all respond similarly, never setting foot in the house until assured that the snake was dead and gone.

We fight idolatry not only because the stakes are so high, but also because the temptation is so powerful. The three scenarios described here all feature powerful temptations in different ways. The power of the temptation in the first scenario lies in its seeming authentication by miraculous sign. A prophet in Israel arises who demonstrates power that can only be interpreted as God’s hand upon him. So the logic would be that just as God is with the prophet in his ability to perform miraculous signs, so he must endorse his message as

well. We sometimes make the same assumption, reasoning that if a preacher is attractive, charismatic and eloquent, then his message must be true. We are warned, however, to consider the content of the message more than the power of the messenger. If the content is contrary to the first commandment, the message is to be ignored no matter how fancy the wrapping might be. The second scenario features a different kind of temptation to idolatry. The power of this one comes from the close relationship with the person urging the idolatry. It is coming from a family member or close friend. For the sake of a relationship, we will often do things we would not otherwise do. There is a part of this that is good. My wife rides bicycles with me mostly just to be with me. There is a part of her that enjoys it, but I know that she wouldn't ride regularly if it weren't for my enjoyment of it and her desire to be with me. But we take this relational motive too far if we allow ourselves to be turned from God for the sake of a relationship. Those of you who anticipate future dating relationships that might lead to marriage, if you are dating someone who takes you further from God, you will want to terminate that relationship as quickly as you can. The third scenario is really one of peer pressure, describing a situation in which town leaders use their influence to lead an entire town into idolatry. This is the temptation of "Everyone's doing it," so I might as well go along. So in light of the strength of these temptations and the high stakes involved, we must fight idolatry with everything in us.

## **II. How Do We Fight Idolatry?**

We need first to remember what it is we are fighting. We have been over this before, but it bears some repetition that we might remember what idolatry is. To understand idolatry, you have to start at the beginning. We were created for a relationship with God. I remember reading to my children the book *Are You My Mother?* by P. D. Eastman. It's a simple story about a little bird recently hatched while the hatchling's mother was out of the nest in search of food. The baby chick leaves the nest in search of his mother. He encounters a kitten, a hen, a dog and then a cow, asking each one, "Are you my mother?" He then sees an old car, a boat and a plane, but still doesn't find his mother. Finally, he sees a big steam shovel and is convinced that this must be his mother. But when the steam shovel starts up with a big snort, he says, "You are not my mother. You are a Snort." But by now he is trapped inside the bucket of the steam shovel and cries out, "I want my mother." The steam shovel then opens its giant bucket, and drops him back in his nest just as his mother is returning.

In a similar way, we are created for a relationship with God. But because of our sin, we don't want to face God. But still we have a longing for a connection with God, just like the baby bird had a longing for its mother. The void must be filled, and we fill it with lesser things. G. K. Chesterton said that when we "cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing, we worship anything." So

we make of idols such things as work, money, family or the approval of others. Woody Allen once said that middle class people take life very seriously—with equal seriousness God and Carpet. One of the big idols of our day are idolatries of the body. When people feel powerless, instead of responding by seeking refuge in the God of all power and love, they will often seize control in an idolatrous way of what they are able to control. So they seek obsessively to control their bodies through constant exercise and diet. It is merely an attempt to fill the void left by not wanting to face God and invite him back into our lives.

We fight this idolatry in several ways. First, we are careful to listen to God's voice before any other voice. Verse 3 tells us not to listen to the voice of the false prophet, and verse 4 tells us the alternative—listening to God's voice. The reason they are told to put to death the false prophet is that the simple alternatives are the death of God or the death of the false prophet. If the false prophet is listened to instead of God, it is like putting God to death. Here's an application. Have you ever been tempted to read the horoscopes in the newspaper or to mess around with tarot cards or have someone read your palm? All of these deal with an area of life that rightly belongs only to God. To be in a relationship with him means that we listen to him for our guidance, not to these other sources. I believe that just reading these things as entertainment is a mistake, because they can't help but affect you. Put them to death by paying no attention to them at all.

The second way we fight idolatry is through repentance. I think that the practical point of the command for the family member to take up the first stone against the relative urging idolatry is to take steps to make sure we are free of this sin. And the way we do that is through repentance. We have all been guilty of idolatry, but there is cleansing and healing power in the blood of Jesus, and a Father who is glad to have us come to him for this cleansing.

The third way we fight idolatry is through church discipline. The church is not a theocracy like Israel, and the power of the sword has been removed from us by Jesus. But the church is still given spiritual power in the form of church discipline. That's how Paul applied this passage in 1 Corinthians 5:13. A church member had been living in immorality with his father's wife, and Paul urges what we would call excommunication, quoting from verse 5 of our chapter as he does so. **“So you shall purge the evil from your midst.”** An important clarification is needed here. This passage is not saying that anyone who has ever been guilty of idolatry should come under church discipline. Idolatry is something we all battle, and all of us have fallen prey to it from time to time. It is talking rather about the person who actively encourages others to do so. It is the one Jesus spoke of when he said, **“but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea”** (Matthew 18:6).

### **III. How Does God Help in the Fight against Idolatry?**

Some will read this chapter and say things like, “I thought Christianity was all about forgiveness, not capital punishment and its New Testament form of excommunication. Isn’t the church supposed to be a hospital for sinners? Wasn’t Jesus described as the friend of sinners?” So where is the grace of God in this chapter? Did you notice the repetition of the Exodus story in this text? In urging his people to turn away and keep away from idolatry, God reminds them that he is the one **“who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery”** (v. 5, 10). He is reminding them of the bigger perspective they need to be careful to maintain, the perspective of grace. He delivered his people from bondage not because they earned it, but because he loved them. He wants them to deal decisively with idolatry not because he’s some uptight God who gets nervous when his rules aren’t followed, but because he is a God of love who wants to invite us to return to that for which we were created, a relationship with God.

Do you remember when we were talking about idolatry earlier that I said that even though we were created for God, we don’t want to face him? We don’t want to face God because of the shame brought on by our sin. God is so zealous to restore what was lost in the sinful rebellion of the human race that he has undertaken to take care of this shame once and for all. He has done it through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. And now he invites you to come home to him. The baby bird has found its mother finally. We were created for a relationship with God, and through Jesus God has provided a way back.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

The closing application is to repent of our idolatry and come home. You were never meant for a relationship with the steam shovel. Only in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus can you find the rest your soul seeks.