



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

A Faith That Profits Nothing

Isaiah 44.6-22

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Joshua

1. Our text is in Isaiah, and we'll get there momentarily, but I want to begin in Joshua 24. As Moses had done, Joshua gave a farewell address to Israel's leaders (v 1).
 - a. He had been a faithful servant and outstanding leader. He had led the people to victory in many great battles, subjecting much of Canaan to Israelite occupation and rule.
 - b. But Israel had not completely committed themselves to exclusive service of Yahweh.
 - c. So, Joshua's farewell "state of the nation" speech has throughout its text his concern that Israel would not learn to be faithful and exclusive in their commitment.
2. The specific problem that concerned him was idolatry.
 - a. The people declared their unwavering loyalty to the Lord of Israel (vv 16-18, 21, 24).
 - b. But Joshua knew they had not fully surrendered.
 - i. Twice, he told them to "put away the gods" that they had long served (vv 14, 23).
 - ii. He also reminded them that such service dated to Abraham's day (vv 2, 14-15).
 - c. The picture that emerges is that idolatry was not just a matter of *replacing* God; it involved serving other gods *alongside* him.
 - d. Joshua warned them of a tragic outcome if they did not change (19-20).

Jeremiah

3. Joshua's expectation was realized throughout Israel's history; Jeremiah 7.1-15 is perhaps the most succinct statement.
 - a. Jeremiah called on the people to repent (vv 1, 3, 5, 7).
 - b. Their sins were many and grievous (vv 4, 6, 8-11); punishment was certain (vv 12-15).
 - c. Notice that Jeremiah singled out idolatry for special attention (vv 6, 9).
 - d. But notice too that this was not false worship undertaken in *place* of God, but idolatry practiced *alongside* of God (vv 2, 4, 10-11).¹
4. What Joshua feared proved to be the primary sin that led to Israel's destruction. As we study what the Bible says about idolatry, we learn four important truths.

¹ My point here is not to say that it was *never* the case in Israel replaced God with idols, but to call attention to the fact that their idolatry did not always involve replacement. We must appreciate this to see the danger idolatry poses for us.

- a. Idolatry is *never* acceptable.
- b. Idolatry was a longstanding problem for God's people.
- c. Idolatry was often not merely a replacement for God, but a division of devotion to God.
- d. Idolatry is not mainly about statues, but about trust and loyalty.
 - i. In Israel's setting, the main reason other gods and goddesses were so prevalent and tempting was because of their association with the fertility of crops, so important in an agrarian culture. It is not hard to imagine that at least some of the Israelites practiced idolatrous rites because they hoped doing so would help them have better harvests.
 - ii. The form is different, but both Jesus and Paul pointed to a similar problem (Matt 6.24; Col 3.5).

Our Challenge

5. It is imperative that we see all of the above points, but especially the third and fourth.
 - a. Idolatry often goes unnoticed in the modern church because we tend to think of it only in terms of statues and images (and some examples of that still exist).
 - b. Thinking of it only that way leads us to relegate idolatry to history and imagine that it is not a temptation we have to face. After all, even our money says, "In God we trust." We know where our allegiance is.
 - c. But, what if idolatry is not just about statues? What if *things* or *priorities* are practically elevated to a place *alongside* God?
6. Evidence exists that this does occur.
 - a. Walter Brueggemann — "In order to appreciate [Isaiah 44:1-23] as a resource for faith, it is necessary to contrast Yahweh to the would-be gods of our time and place. In the United States, the rival gods are likely the icons of free market capitalism that run from entertainment celebrities and sports heroes to the 'bull market' to the generative power of television ads, all of which seek to seduce us into a cozy world of private safety and happiness" (*Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Commentary, 69).
 - b. Os Guinness — "But the blunt, sad fact is that we evangelicals, in the most prominent form of the evangelical community or subculture, are becoming the strongest rival to mainline Protestantism *as the worldliest Christian tradition in America*. From a general materialism and secularity in priorities and preoccupations, to particular captivities to such modern idols as psychology, management, and marketing, the pattern is starkly plain" (*Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance*, 54; emphasis mine).
7. Those are strong statements. But even they may not be sufficient to help us see the challenge. Perhaps the following will make the concept more concrete.
 - a. Each year, a Sunday is revered in the lives of millions of Americans unlike any other, including Easter, Christmas, or Mother's Day. It is Super Bowl Sunday.
 - b. The day poses a challenge, not to *forget* God, but to place something *alongside* him.
 - c. Some churches rearrange their service schedules and content to accommodate the game.
 - i. Some correctly reason that the time we meet is optional; we sometimes change it for other things. Why not the Super Bowl?
 - ii. Some are probably correct in reasoning that we can use a schedule change as a gateway to building relationships with neighbors who would not otherwise attend an activity in our churches.

- iii. Are the schedule accommodations idolatrous? In light of what we have seen in Joshua and Jeremiah, we must at least admit the possibility (motives are always tricky to discern).
 - iv. A way to clarify it might be what I'll call "the space traveler test." Suppose we had visitors from another planet whose mission was to determine what we think is important. What might they conclude if they visited on Super Bowl Sunday?
8. That's a challenging thought experiment, but may still be too general.
- a. I've noticed that some who would protest the loudest if their congregation changed the meeting time for the Super Bowl willingly rearrange their *personal* schedules to accommodate that game or some other (I knew one man who wore his ear phone during the service; I've known others who exited and returned to service so they could check a score).
 - b. We should also not limit the example to football or sports generally. Hobbies, concerts, travel, recreational and family activities, or the pursuit of a vocation can become forms of practical idolatry.
 - c. In each case, there is nothing inherently wrong with the activity or the benefit derived from it (just as there was nothing wrong with ancient Israel hoping for good crops, though of course the making/worship of graven images was inherently wrong).
 - d. Notice again that the motives involved may be hard to discern. Are these accommodations examples of idolatry?
 - e. Again, a good way to check our own motives is with "the space traveler test." If outsiders heard the reasons we use for making the choices we make, what would they conclude is important to us?

Isaiah

9. Hopefully we see how serious the question is. It is not one anyone else can answer for us. But it might help as we consider it more to review the reasons making a priority out of any material thing is both dangerous and foolish. For that, we turn to Isaiah 44.
10. Verses 6-8 remind us of God's uniqueness. "In an always changing, unstable world, there is One who does not change, a 'Rock' to which beaten, battered people may cling" (John Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary, 502).
11. Verses 9-20 show the futility of idols.
- a. Verses 9-11 - Those who "fashion idols are nothing" (9); they are placing their trust in builders who are "only human" (10-11).
 - b. Verses 12-14 - The futility is made worse by the fact that so much energy is expended for something that is nothing (12-14).
 - c. Verses 15-17 - Furthermore, the "nothing" we pursue is inferior to us who pursue it (vv 15-17). (Quick, football fans, who won last year's Super Bowl? Two years ago? Three?)
 - d. Verses 18-20 - The end result is saddest of all: what we do not properly use, we lose. When we pursue the wrong things, we diminish our ability to pursue the One who is always the right thing; we deprive ourselves of the fullness of a relationship with God, exchanging it for a meal of "ashes" (v 20).
12. But verses 21-22 show that all is not lost: we have time to think about these things, to change our priorities and direction. We can remember, change, and be forgiven. Hope remains!

A Call to Serve

13. The words of a Super Bowl player may help us keep the right perspective. Before Super Bowl VI (1972), Dallas Cowboys running back Duane Thomas said, "If it's the ultimate game, how come they're playing it again next year?"
14. There is Isaiah's point and the main thing we must remember, whether our interest is the Super Bowl, World Series, a hobby, a show, a career, or even some good recreation or activity. "From the perspective of this text, these 'idols' are fake precisely because they have no power to keep their promises. Thus such 'adored' icons as Coke or Nike cannot in the end keep their promises, either to make us happy or to make us secure" (Brueggemann, 69).

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