

Idolatry and Separation - Israel's Vice and Israel's Calling

God had given Israel prohibitions against idolatry and instructions for holy living that were more than just a test of their obedience. These guidelines were for Israel's own good (Deuteronomy 10:12-13) to preserve Israel and protect their witness of God to the world. Understanding more about these parameters on idolatry and living a life separate from the world will help us appreciate their necessity and benefit in the lives of Israel, as well as in our own.

Stop and Pray - God, show me how Your wisdom on idolatry and separation can benefit my life so I can be wholly dedicated to You.

1. How are you unique or different from the people in the world around you?

Idolatry - Idolatry is considered evil by God. Let's see if we can discover why.

2. Judges 3:7 tells us "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and Asherahs." This evil consisted of their doing two things – what were they? How did these actions speak "louder than words" of where their hearts were?
3. What can we learn about idolatry in Old Testament times from Scripture, dictionaries, and Bible encyclopedias?
 - a. Note the main points about idolatry in the following passages.
Exodus 20:2-6, 22-23

Deuteronomy 12:29-31

I Chronicles 16:26

Job 31:24-28

Psalm 106:34-38

Isaiah 44:9-20

Isaiah 45:20

Dictionary or Bible Dictionary definition:

Read pages 6 and 7 of this lesson to learn more about the kind of idolatry Israel was engaging in during the time of Judges.

b. Summarize your findings on idolatry.

4. Judges 2:11-12 captures what Israel's idolatry consisted of. As a review, what four phrases does the author use to describe Israel's actions?

5. By New Testament times, Israel had learned from their Babylonian captivity to remove worship of physical idols from their lives. However, the New Testament still mentions idolatry. What does it have to say?
I Corinthians 10:14, 20-21 (*Note: Partaking in a religious feast meant taking part in the fellowship with the one worshipped at the feast.*)

Matthew 6:24; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5

Philippians 3:18-19; Romans 16:17-18

2 Timothy 3:1-5

6. What does idolatry lead to if it goes unchecked?
Hosea 9:10

Romans 1:21-32

7. Based on all your research so far, how would you evaluate in your own life whether a hobby or passion is an idol or simply something you enjoy and on which you spend a lot of time?
8. Remembering everything we studied in Lesson 4 about enemies, how would you explain the difference between an enemy and an idol?

Heart Check: Is there anything in your life that parallels the idolatry we have studied above? Where is the center of your life? On what do you rely? If Christ were to ask whether you truly loved Him more than these, how would you answer? If you have placed something before God in your life, note that thing or things and examine *why* you are allowing them to have such power in your life.

9. What is the benefit of obeying the command, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3)? Spend some time thinking about this question before answering.
10. If by the second commandment (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 4:15-19) we are forbidden to physically make an idol in the form of anything, not even one which represents Jesus or God, how then are we to think about God? Romans 1:19-20, Hebrews 1:1-3, and John 14:7-10 may be helpful.

Note: As our knowledge of God increases through the study of His Word, we need to change our view of Him accordingly. If we picture a God who is only loving and do not include all His attributes, such as His justice and power, we will come away with an inaccurate view of Him.

Separation - God knew what the negative spiritual, emotional, and physical outcomes of the Canaanite influence on the nation of Israel would be. God wanted to preserve in the children of Israel an accurate representation of Himself to the world. The guidelines for separation helped Israel illustrate God's goodness and character to the world, protected that witness from being tainted by the influence of the idolatrous world around them, and blessed Israel by maintaining their covenant relationship with God. In His wisdom, God wants us to be separate from our world to some extent too.

11. How separate from the world are believers to be and why?
Matthew 9:9-12 - How would the circumstances of this setting instruct us?

Matthew 28:19-20

Romans 16:17-19

I Corinthians 15:33

2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 (Yoked means tied, bound, or linked together.) What relationships are binding?

1 Peter 2:9-12

I John 2:15-17

12. After reviewing the above verses on idolatry and separation, what boundaries should you place in your life? This will be different for each person depending on what leads his or her heart away from God.

Idolatry is the blurring or obscuring of the distinction between the living God who creates and the creation He has created (Exodus 20:4-6). Anything that is substituted or added to the worship of the one true God is idolatry. Today it is called sacralization (the act of making something sacred) which occurs when we bestow people, things, events, and processes with 'sacred status' (e.g. money, self, human sexuality).

The ban on images that God demanded of His people was an entirely unprecedented idea. Every other culture of the time worshipped idols.

Baal was one of the chief male deities of the Canaanite pantheon. The inhabitants of Canaan practiced Baal worship, which was conducted by priests in temples, and in good weather, outdoors in fields and particularly on hilltops called "high places." The cult included animal sacrifice, ritualistic meals, and licentious dances. Near the rock altar was a sacred pillar, and close by, was the symbol of the Asherah, both of which apparently symbolized human fertility. High places had chambers for sacred prostitution by female and also by male cult prostitutes (I Kings 14:23-24; 2 Kings 23:7). The gaiety and licentious character of Baal worship always had a subtle attraction for the austere Hebrews bound to serve a holy God under a rigorous moral code. Baal was seen as the god of the storm who brought rain on the crops, was pictured as a bull to signify potent fertility, and was also associated with the sun. Astarte was Baal's female consort associated with the moon. She was the patroness of war as well as sex. First daughters were given to her to live a life of temple prostitution. Worshippers of Astarte and Baal were attempting to gain success in war (safety) and to gain abundant crops and flocks (wealth or security).

If you lose the actual idols and relocate the worship activities to modern day settings, it doesn't sound too different from our world today. Although we don't consciously worship an idol, the goal of our lifestyle is to achieve the same ends - security and wealth at the expense to our relationship with God.

At the heart of idolatry is the concept of magic. A human would craft the statue. Then the living presence of the god in the image was magically accomplished through the "opening of the mouth" ceremony. The cult image became the vessel for the deity and the primary focus of the deity's powers. The presence of the deity in the statue was then maintained magically through offerings and the proper care of the statue. If the statue was neglected or desecrated, the deity could withdraw of its own free will or be forced to withdraw. There was a significant degree of control exercised by the human manufacturers and worshippers through magical means. *In idolatry there is a human manipulative attempt that inverts the creative order.*

Pagan deities have no problem tolerating the simultaneous worship of more than one god because Satan is behind them all. In the ancient near east, there were many different divination processes invoked to inquire of the deities, including placing a test before the idol by which means the deity would answer a question (similar to Gideon's fleeces). Also feeding a deity or his envoy provided the basis for the supplicant's expectation of divine action on his behalf. Similarly, knowing the name of a heavenly being provided power over that being. These last two manipulations will shed light on Manoah's actions in the Samson story.

— Information taken from “*The NIV Application Commentary on Judges and Ruth*” by K. Lawson Younger Jr., pages 45-47, 95, 188, and 290 and “*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*”.