

REFLECTIONS ON FAITH AND WORK

Naming the Idol

For many of us, reading the Bible can sometimes make us very uncomfortable. The passages where Jesus is described as "casting out demons" do not connect with our modern world. What is a demon? What can this healing of a demonic man possibly be all about? These are the passages we often read through quickly and move on.

In a similar way, the references in both the Old and New Testaments to idols and idol worship also seem very outdated for us. Large golden idols, shaped in the form of a bull or a snake, are not part of our landscape. No one, not even modern populist dictators, are demanding that followers bow down to their images or statues when a trumpet blows or at designated times of the day. This is not the world we live in and the Bible's discussion of this subject seems antiquated and irrelevant.

◆ **Why All the Warnings?**

Yet Biblical writers, in Old Testament times and in the first century A.D., repeatedly warned Christians about idols. The Apostle John, in the last verse of his first letter, lovingly instructed his "dear children" to "keep yourself from idols" (I John 5:21). When the Apostle Paul discussed how to live holy lives, he told his followers to avoid sexual immorality, lust and greed, and then referred to these as "idolatry" (Colossians 3:5). In many New Testament passages, the threat of idolatry is addressed even though there is no association with material images or golden figures. An idol is whatever or whoever claims that loyalty which belongs to God alone.

It is fascinating to me that Old Testament prophets often made fun of idols, ridiculing them and the foolish practices associated with their worship. The prophets knew that idols were a real threat, but apparently believed that mocking them would be an effective way of disarming their power over people. Isaiah perfected this approach into a fine art form. Listen to his words:

“He [the carpenter] cut down cedars . . .
It is man’s fuel for burning;
some of it he takes and warms himself,
he kindles a fire and bakes bread.
But he also fashions a god and worships it;
he makes an idol and bows down to it . . .
He prays to it and says,
‘Save me, you are my god.’
They [the idols] know nothing, they understand nothing;
their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
and their minds are closed so they cannot understand.”
(Isaiah 44:14-18)

◆ **When Our Work Becomes Our Idol**

It is easy for us to see the stupidity of worshipping a wooden figure, carved from cedar (as in Isaiah's day) or molded from metal and covered with gold. But when objects of worship are not physical forms or symbols, we can mistakenly practice idolatry without ever thinking about it in these terms. Work can be our idol. Our careers can be our "god." We need to be on the alert and listen to Biblical warnings about idolatry, because idolatry is a threat to us as well.

Workaholism is not just a social problem, it's a spiritual one. For many of us, work has become an end in itself, a way to escape from family problems, a way to gain recognition and respect. And when our careers fail to give us the results we expect, we become disillusioned and "burned out."

In the name of advancing our careers, we are willing to make huge sacrifices. While not offering bulls or goats on an altar, we do offer up incredible amounts of money and time for career advancement through continuing education programs, often added to the end of busy workdays. We sacrifice time with our families and friends in order to "better care for them" -- at least that's what we say. As our children and friends drift away, we realize later that the price was too high. Continuing educational advancement is a good thing, but the price we pay needs to be carefully balanced against other obligations. Sacrificing for our careers is easy to justify, but it can become a form of idolatry in which we substitute a commitment and loyalty to God for an all-out, full-court press concentrated on our own professional advancement.

If our identity is in our work, we are in trouble. Isaiah would mock us for being so stupid. Our careers do not define who we are; our work is not an accurate description of our worth in God's sight. Our identity should be in our relationship with Jesus Christ. Any other source for finding significance or meaning in our lives is a form of idolatry. The Biblical writers were right - watch out for idols!

Dr. John A. Bernbaum