

Watch Yourselves! Beware of Idolatry

Deuteronomy 4:15-31

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II. But _____ ! Beware of idolatry.

III. If you serve idols, you will fall, for the Lord your God is _____ .

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Application – heart idols today

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- 2.
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Exhortations

- Let's watch ourselves very carefully – idols will draw away our hearts (15, 19)
- Let's seek the Lord with all our heart and soul (29)
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Sermon

Andrew Hancock

I want to share how wonderful and glorious God is this morning!

When studying a passage often I jot down a list of everything I see about who God is, his character and nature. And I couldn't help but share with you what I saw.

- **God is invisible** (15) all idols have a form, but God has no form, he's unique
- **God speaks** (15) – he reveals his will to people, wants to be known
- **God is personal** “your God,” in our passage over 10x, God is relational, has special people of his own possession.
- **God is faithful** – true to his covenant promises (20, 31)
- **God is jealous** (24) angry at idolatry and zealous for his honor (21, 25)
- **God is merciful** (31) has compassion on his people.

What amazing truths! Just in this short passage. What a glorious God! Today, I want to focus on the last three in my list: faithful, jealous, and merciful.

- So in looking at these three characteristics of God, I built them into what I see are the main point of the passage, our main truths for this morning.
- I wrote these to explain God's message to Israel in this text, but also with an eye on our lives, how it can apply to us as well.
- So, here are the main ideas:
 - God is faithful. He is giving you the good land.
 - But watch yourselves! Beware of idolatry.
 - If you serve idols, you will fall, for the Lord your God is jealous.
 - But if you return to God, you will find him, for the Lord your God is merciful.

So, looking at God's message to Israel from these principles,

- God is going to fight for Israel to go in and take the land that he promised to their forefathers! This shows His faithfulness.
- In the land there will be many other nations with false gods that will tempt their hearts to turn away from God. This serves as a warning.
- Worshiping these false gods leads to sorrow and destruction.
- But, God is there in compassion when Israel returns. This displays God's mercy.

**...so let's review quick, here is my first statement to help us review,
GOD IS FAITHFUL. HE'S GIVING YOU THE GOOD LAND**

The book of Deuteronomy is written to Israel just before going into the promised land!

- Verse 22, “you shall go over and take possession of that good land.”
- Our passage calls it “good land.” The land is a special gift of God to them. This is so exciting and demonstrates God’s goodness to them, after all this wandering in the desert, finally go in!
- You could say Deuteronomy is an “urge to be faithful” That’s the purpose of the book.
- Moses urges the people toward wholehearted faithfulness to God, before entering the good land.
- He does this through three speeches in the book.
- In these speeches, Moses reviews their history and reminds them of God’s laws.
- These speeches instruct the new generation to obey God’s words and find life!
- Moses’ first speech is Deuteronomy chapters 1-4, where we find today’s passage.

... In our passage, Moses gives a warning,

WATCH YOURSELVES! BEWARE OF IDOLATRY (15)

- This is the title of my sermon today because it’s the main tone of the passage.
- If I were to shorten it, it would be, “Take care and beware.”
- This passage is indeed a warning text, with some hope too.
- Verse 15 – watch carefully, 16 – beware, 19 – beware, 23 – take care.
- Verse 15 says, “Watch yourselves very carefully” *literally* means, *give great care to your souls*. It’s watching your inner being, your heart & soul!
- So, why this strong warning, why should they take care and beware?
 - If you look at the passage before ours today, verses 9-14, they should take care to follow God because He is powerful and He speaks with authority.
 - At Mt. Sinai, the Lord Almighty came in fire and declared that they follow His laws and keep the Ten Commandments.
 - Can you imagine a mountain on fire? Whoah! That would command fear, awe, and obedience. You might want to do what that God says!
 - If you look at our passage today, Israel should take care to watch themselves carefully, because idolatry will cause them to forget and forsake this awesome God,
 - Who comes in fire,
 - Who made the heavens and earth.
 - And who created them to worship him!
 - And if they turn from him, He must punish them, for he is zealous for the honor of his great name.
- And if you pan out to the book of Deuteronomy and the OT, idolatry became Israel’s main problem, over and over.

- So God warns them, idols will steal your heart, which belongs to me, and idols will lead you to do great evil.

...looking further into this passage we find this principle,

IF YOU SERVE IDOLS, YOU WILL FALL, FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD IS JEALOUS (15-28)

- We see that, making idols is a “corrupt act” (2x, 16, 25).
- And this corrupt act is particularly bad because it is forgetting the covenant,

Verse 23, “Take care, lest you **forget the covenant** of the LORD your God, he made with you, and make a carved image...”

So what is this covenant? And how do they forget it if they serve idols?

- I did a quick search; the word “Covenant” occurs 28x in Deuteronomy. It’s a super important concept to think about.
- Let’s review quickly some characteristics of a covenant in OT times to help give us some background to our passage.
- Covenants were important agreements, confirmed with oaths and solemn promises. Many came with conditions, what would happen as consequences if someone broke their promise.
- So these covenants initiated relationships of friendship and loyalty.
- Here’s one definition of a biblical covenant,
 “A chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other.”¹
- God had made a covenant with Israel, mediated through Moses.
- Moses gave them the Law, and particularly the Ten Commandments. Much of the book of Deuteronomy is reminding the people of these covenant conditions.
- Through this covenant, God was saying, “here’s how to follow me, if you obey, you will be blessed, but if you disobey, you will be punished.” Israel said, “we agree, we will obey your laws.”
- Read Deut 28 for more specifics, but promises were made, conditions set, consequences laid out.

So, here’s where idolatry comes in, in this Mosaic covenant, idolatry was the main thing God said not to do!

- Look one chapter ahead, ch 5 verse 2, Moses says, “the Lord our God made a covenant with us.”
- Jumping to verse 5,

¹ *Covenant* by Thomas Schreiner, p. 13.

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. ⁷“ ‘You shall have no other gods before me. ⁸“ ‘You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁹ You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ¹⁰ but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

- Recognize this? They are first and second commandments!
- God is saying, If you love me and obey, I will show “steadfast love to thousands!” they’ll be blessings galore!
- Yet, clear as day, if you worship and serve other gods, you will be punished, “for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.”
- And so we see the seriousness of idolatry.
- Idolatry is Israel breaking the covenant made with the Creator of the universe, forsaking the clear teaching of the first and second commands.

- Consequences seen: Jeremiah 11 explains that the reason why they were going to exile was because they broke the covenant, “They [the house of Israel and the house of Judah] have gone after gods and served them...they have broken my covenant that I made with their fathers. Therefore, thus says the Lord, Behold I am bringing disaster upon them.” (11:10-11).
- And chapter 34 explains that the punishment was because they, “did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me.” (34:18)
- How did God describe their disobedience? He said in verse 16, “you turned around and profaned my name.” (16).
- Jeremiah shows that God is serious about his great name and glory and breaking the covenant with him through idolatry did indeed have serious consequences.

We see also in our passage that idolatry is... heart worship followed by actions.

- A key phrase in this passage is verse 19, Israelites would, “be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them.” Three things about idolatry,
 1. Idolatry is being “drawn away” – the heart and soul turns from God.
 2. Idolatry is to “bow down” – it is worship of something other than God.
 3. And idolatry is “serving” other gods – Israel would end up enslaved to the idols, serving them instead of the Lord.

Another reason this idolatry was serious is that it would be turning away from their Lord, who has done so much for them!

- Moses said the Lord had given many good things to many peoples. But Israel was God’s special people.

- Verse 20, “But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day.”
- God had done so much for them, including saving them out of slavery to Egypt.
- This “iron furnace” phrase really struck me. This refers to a kiln, that heats up metal so hot, that, its impurities appear and can be removed.
- This process makes the metal stronger and more useable.
- This is what God did with Israel. In Egypt, He put them through an iron furnace of suffering, so they could be purified and grow, and so that God would get much glory!
- What about your life? Do you have any “iron furnaces” right now? Consider this; maybe God is using your struggles to purify you so that you can be used in greater ways for his glory!
- Also look in verse 20, Israel is compared to an inheritance.
- An inheritance was a valued piece of property from one’s ancestors.
- Israel God’s very own people, greatly valued, saved out of Egypt, so that they would worship him, bring glory to His name!
- How then could they turn from this great God and serve false gods?!

Verses 21-22 are interesting, even Moses, the great leader, who spoke to God face to face, cannot enter into the land because of consequences from God.

- In Numbers 20:1-13, Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it like God wanted. Moses told the people he was bringing water from the rock.
- And so, Moses honored himself instead of glorifying the Lord. To make matters worse he did this as all the people watched!
- In Deut 32:51, God comments on this incident. God describes what happened as Moses breaking faith with him, and not treating him as holy.
- So Moses was certainly to blame, but the people were to blame as well.
- They were complicit. Israel had quarreled with Moses and quarreled with the Lord.
- So they provoked Moses to anger. That is why he said in verse 21, “the Lord was angry with me because of you.”
- He’s not shifting blame, there’s plenty of that to go around.

Now let’s look at verse 25, here we see a change,

- It goes from the here and now warnings of idolatry... to the future warning.
- It shifts to what will happen to their children and grandchildren if they embrace other gods.
- It’s an “if, then” revelation about the future.
- If you serve idols, then you will fall.
- It is another angle of warning this new generation about to go into the land.
- In verse 26, Moses calls this “evil in the sight of the Lord”
- Idolatry is great evil, it provokes the Lord to anger because he is zealous for his glory.

Let's look at the consequences of idolatry described in this passage. Verses 26-29.

- They would utterly perish from the good land they are just about to enter.
- They would not live there long!
- Moses says, “the Lord will scatter you among the peoples”
- Israel will be conquered and exiled, driven out of the land by the Lord, and will be few in number, scattered among many nations.
- In those nations, they will serve idols from human hands,
- “that can't see, hear, eat or smell.” They can't do anything! Yet Israel will serve them! How Ironic. How sad.
- Idolatry will bring about a great fall – emptiness, sorrow, exile, death.

That's intense consequences!

My next question is, what's the root of all this punishment?

- Well, the passage gives us the reason or the ground for all this, what's the root? Verse 24, because, “The Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”
- Here we're drilling down deep to the core of the matter, the character and nature of God. When his people disobey and turn to idols, he must act to punish, because his name is jealous.
- I did a lot of reading on this, “God as jealous” concept.
- It is challenging to explain because in English, we usually think of jealousy as a bad thing, jealousy as selfish envy.
- Here in our text, however, it is actually a name of God, it means “his name is jealous.”
- One definition I like is by J.I. Packer in *Knowing God*, he has a whole chapter on God's jealousy I found helpful.
- Packer defines God's jealousy as this,
 - “Praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.”²
- I like that, zeal to preserve something precious.
- In our passage, God is protective of his honor and name.
- Idolatry is an insult to his name and honor, because it forsakes the Lord, who has supreme worth, by following after false gods, that aren't not worth anything.
- Isaiah 42:8 is a verse I found that explains this well,
 - “I am the LORD; that is my name;
 - my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.”
- So we can say, with idolatry, God is provoked to jealousy. He must act to protect his reputation. He will not give his glory to another.
- So, He punishes, He avenges His honor. He destroys, He consumes, He exiles, all to preserve something supremely precious, namely, the honor of his name!

² *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer, p. 170.

- God also has a zeal to preserve something else that is precious, his covenant-love relationship with His people.
- This is positive; it's passion to protect a special relationship.
- It's a praiseworthy jealousy that is a part of love, a zeal for the purity of a covenant relationship.
- It's the fiery, protective part of love.
- Song of Solomon 8:6 says,
 - “For love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like a blazing fire, like a mighty flame.”
- God's love is jealous, passionate to protect and preserve love.
- One human picture of this that came up a lot in my reading is that of a loving jealousy of a husband. There is an African saying that goes,
 - He that is not jealous is not in love.
- So what happens when another man gets in-between this loving husband and his covenant wife? This husband steps in, takes action, he does everything he can to stop it, why? To preserve and protect this love relationship. He's jealous for his covenant love!
- God has made a loving covenant with Israel. This is why God is moved to show mercy when they return to him. Even after Israel sinned again and again with idolatry.
- This brings us to the next truth of our passage,

IF YOU RETURN TO GOD, YOU WILL FIND HIM, FOR THE LORD YOUR GOD IS MERCIFUL (29-31)

Let's read 29-31 and look what we see God do! Says, “But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. ³⁰ When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice. ³¹ For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.”

- Wow, talk about a God of compassion! Even after all they did to forsake him and run after other gods, The Lord shows mercy to Israel.
- God as merciful – means he has compassion for the suffering, he shows his goodness to those who are afflicted.
- Here Moses said the Israelites would seek the Lord, search with all that they are, with their “heart and soul.”
- And they would find a merciful God waiting! Simply amazing.
- The word “return” in verse 30 means more like... repent, to change ways.

- How did they return and repent? The text says, by starting to “obey his voice” again and follow his commands.
- This describes a wholehearted coming back to God after forsaking him in deep idolatry.
- And we see that God is faithful to his promises, it says God will not, “forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.”
- Because of his promises to them, the Lord would always be there to show mercy when they returned to him.

Well, how did Israel do with the warnings of this passage? Did they keep up their end of the covenant with Moses, staying away from idols?

- Hmmmm, there were times when they repented and returned to God.
- But by and large they did not do well with this, they kept going back into idolatry, over and over. This became their main problem.
- Moses did foresee this. He recognized that Israel actually had a heart problem and God would have to step in and do something about it.
- At the end of Deuteronomy, in chapter 30 verse 6, Moses said this, “And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.” This is really important.
- Moses said that God himself would do heart surgery. Replacing an old, dead heart of idolatry, with a new, living heart of love.
- This would enable them to have life abundantly, enabling them to follow God with all their heart and soul. Wow, what a gift!

And this is exactly what God does for us in Christ!!

- We too, like Israel, have a heart problem. Every person has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Every person, apart from Christ, is an idol-worshipper, because they honor something else as supreme. Go look at Romans 1-3 about this.
- And so, God’s jealousy comes into play, zealous for his name, God must punish sin. Without Christ, humans are dead in their transgressions and sins, condemned by a holy God for eternal punishment.
- What is needed is a circumcised heart! Like, a heart replacement surgery.
- This is a gift of the Holy Spirit for those who trust in Christ to fix their idolatry problem once and for all.

If you think of Israel, they were so far away from the Lord, in exile, scattered, defeated. But God had mercy!

- You know, it’s never too late to turn to the Lord, no matter what you have done, you’re never too far from God, no matter how defeated you feel. God will have compassion if you turn to him in humility.
- New birth, with a new heart, is God’s solution in Christ.

- When we turn to him and repent, like this passage says, seeking him with all our heart and soul, he will have mercy on us!
- That's the good news of the gospel that this text points to.

Now that we have walked through the passage, let me summarize things this way,
Take care and beware!

- God is faithful.
He will give you this good land. He won't forget his promise.
- God is jealous.
He will punish you for idolatry. He won't gloss over sin.
- God is merciful.
He will not forget his covenant. He won't leave you or forsake you.

These statements are not just for the Israelites back then, we too can apply all of this to our lives today!

- We are all worshippers; we will serve something or someone.
- True happiness is found only in God, because we were created to find our delight in Him.
- So, if we turn to anything other than God to satisfy our hearts, this only brings great sorrow!
- But, the good news of the gospel is that, if we turn to God in repentance with all our heart, he will have mercy on us, revive our hearts, every time! What an amazing God!
- Let's worship God, glorify his great name alone.

So, what is an idol in this day and age anyway?

- Making a figure out of wood or stone and bowing to it, it seems so foreign in our Western culture.
- But, we need to be aware, there is still idolatry today.
- If an idol is something that draws our heart away so that we serve it rather than God, then they are everywhere!
- Here's a helpful definition I found from the *Gospel Transformation Study Bible*, Idols are, "Anyone or anything that we make ultimate in our lives, in place of the true and living God."³
- Money, following our desires, the pursuit of success, social media influence, entertainment, politics, even relationships – all these can become idols if we are not careful.
- Israel was drawn to idols because they promised them something! The gods of other nations promised protection, success in battle, good crops, blessings to have children, among other things.

³ *Gospel Transformation Study Bible*, note on Deut 4:15-31, p. 243.

Our heart idols today also promise us something, here's four of them,

- Approval, power, control, and comfort.
 1. Approval idol, promises that you will be liked and accepted.
 - If you live for approval idol, you will be loved and embraced by all.
 2. Power idol, promises influence and success.
 - Living for the power idol will bring success and you will be valuable.
 3. Control idol, promises safety and a secure future.
 - If you gain more control over everything, you'll be safe and happy.
 4. Comfort idol, promises good health and peace.
 - Living for the comfort idol will make you happy and at ease.

When I look at a list of heart idols like this I think, wow, in my life, these seem to have come up again and again, kind of like they did with Israel. Let me give you a few examples.

- Approval (teenager), power/control (twenties), comfort (currently).

One book you can get and read to help you with all this is *Counterfeit Gods* by Tim Keller. This is where I got my list of four heart idols.

- This will help you identify the counterfeit gods of this culture.
- And it helps you diagnose your heart idols.
- Then, it teaches you how to bring your idols to God, so that you see some amazing change through the gospel.

All I can say is that I need to be constantly reflecting on how these heart idols may be rearing their ugly head.

- Often they are found in something I am thinking about way too much... or they're in something I am afraid of, or anxious about.
- What helps the most is to look to the character of God, like we have done this morning. And to look to what the Bible says about my identity in Christ. He is my only hope in all this!

What about you? Can you identify your deeper, heart idols? Will you bring them to God, seeking him with all your heart and soul? Take some time to consider these questions this week as you pray and think.

My exhortations for us this morning come straight from the text,

1. Let's watch ourselves very carefully – idols will draw away our hearts (15, 19)
2. Let's seek the Lord with all our heart and soul (29)
3. And let's return to the Lord and obey His voice (30)