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"KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS"

- EXODUS 32:1-8,30-35. - JULY 28. -

ASTRANGE picture of inconsistency is presented in today's lesson. The Israelites – who, after witnessing many manifestations of divine favor and power on their behalf, after reaching Sinai and entering into a covenant with the Lord, in which their obligations were represented briefly in the ten commandments – are in this lesson shown as idolaters, violating the second commandment and the spirit of the first. Moses, after declaring God's commandments to the people, ascended Mount Sinai in their sight into the presence of God, to receive the commandments written on tables of stone. Day after day passed and he did not return. The forty days absence in Mount Sinai must have appeared a long time to the people, who were waiting and longing for entrance upon the promised Canaan possessions. Yet how strange that they should forget the terrible sights and sounds which preceded his going, when the mountain shook and out of the clouds and darkness and midst flaming fire and the voice of a trumpet, God manifested himself to them and only Moses was able to approach, with Joshua, his servant. How strange that these things should all be forgotten within forty days! What an evidence we have here of the instability of human sentiment! Yet we must remember that these Israelites were born in bondage.

In the absence of Moses they came to Aaron, his brother, a very different man, not a leader in the same sense of the word, nor so courageous, nor so governed by principles. The people gathered to him, saying in effect, "Bestir yourself; [R4022 : page 204] we should be going on our way to the land of promise. We know not what has become of Moses who has been our leader; he may have deserted us here. We want God to be our leader, but we want something that will represent him, something that we can

see. Moses did very well while he was with us, but he has gone and might go again. Make us an image of God, that we may always have God to be our leader, something that will help us as we seek to worship him with whom we have just made a covenant, who has promised to lead us into the land of Canaan." The people were not irreligious; indeed, exceptionally few of the human family are irreligious. In man's very constitution divine worship is provided for: the very topmost organs of the brain represent this religious sentiment and dispose him to worship somebody or something.

This, which was true of the Israelites, is true of mankind everywhere from then until now. Hence the necessity for instruction, that all may recognize the proper things to be revered, to be worshiped, to be most highly appreciated. The Israelites were learning this lesson, and with us as with them there is necessity often that we should not only have the plain statement of a truth, but that its weight and conviction should be borne in upon us by some particular lessons. The commandment had said that they should make no likeness nor graven image to represent God, and what they did was only indirectly a breach of this, for the golden calf which Aaron made for them was not graven, not carved, but cast in a mould, and it did not represent God, but probably – like the images they had seen in Egypt – was a nondescript thing which merely represented divine characteristics – a calf's body with a human head and with wings, symbolical of strength, of intelligence, omniscience. So many Christians, similarly without a wish to infract a divine law, are disposed to take too great liberties and to introduce to too large a degree their own conceptions in divine worship – without sufficient care to hold to the exact instructions of the divine message. This is always a mistake, by whomsoever committed.

The only wise, proper course for any is to take heed particularly to the Word of the Lord, and to allow themselves little if any liberty beyond the very letter of that Word. Thus today we

see in the religious services of various denominations how, little by little, the simplicity of the apostolic pattern for the Church and its worship has been departed from. Some have taken little liberties, some have taken great liberties, with the result that some have departed a little and others have departed a great deal from the divine standard, and always to their injury. The lesson to Spiritual Israelites here should be, "See that thou make all things after the pattern that I showed thee in the holy mount." If we need divine instruction at all on the subject we need to follow those instructions carefully, explicitly. Let us remember that we cannot improve upon them, that any alteration means injury to us.

THE DANGERS OF EXPEDIENCY

We cannot suppose that Aaron fully sympathized with the people in the matter of this making of the golden calf; we must suppose that he knew better and meant better, and that it was a mere expedient on his part to hold in check the rebellion of the people whose discontent was manifest in this demand. We must suppose that, in apparently acquiescing in the demand, Aaron was seeking to gain time until Moses would return. Possibly, too, his demand that the people produce their earrings and other ornaments of gold was originally a mere subterfuge; that he hoped by making this demand they would draw back and decline to part with their ornaments, and that thus he would be able to say, "Well, I cannot make you what would represent a god except out of gold, and I have no gold for the purpose unless you sacrifice your jewelry." But, however good his intentions, the lesson for us is that his course was an improper one.

Spiritual Israelites should never take this position – should never say, let us do evil that good may result, let us yield some principles for the sake of harmony and the good of the cause. Alas, this seems to be the difficulty with the leaders of God's people all through the ages. The fear of man, that bringeth a snare, has

interfered with the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom. All Spiritual Israelites should learn, should fix it in their hearts, that while moderation and a disposition to be obliging and helpful and considerate of the wishes of others are prominent elements of Christian grace and to be cultivated, nevertheless the principles of the divine law are never to be infringed, nor even compromised for the sake of blessing others. We are to remember that when great emergencies arise God is superior to every one of them, and they can never be understood as his voice commanding us to violate the principles of righteousness which he has set before us. We are to do our duty in harmony with his law as kindly, as gently, as wisely as possible, and leave all the results to him – the Almighty. Whatever others may do, however others may think or compromise, let us take the Apostle's standpoint and say, "We can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth." (2 Cor. 13:8.) Our consciences will not permit us to compromise where principles are involved, though we should gladly be the readiest of all to compromise where principle is not involved.

THE COST OF WRONG-DOING

People usually are attracted to wrong-doing by the thought that thus they escape difficulties or sufferings, or thus they gain advantages and blessings. But this is only a theory; as a matter of fact it is the reverse, every misdeed is costly. The Israelites stripped themselves of their jewels to carry out their misguided religious sentiments. And how often we see this amongst Spiritual Israelites! How many, in their worshiping of a sect or denomination, will strip themselves of some of their most valuable possessions! How many sacrifice to these idols what God has not directed! idols which are set up contrary to the instructions of his Word – devoting to them time, influence, money – time which should be devoted to a pure worship of God, based upon a study and better understanding of his Word; influence which should be exerted in a very opposite direction, to a maintenance of the liberty

wherewith Christ has made us free, and to a fellowship with those who are seeking to stand fast in that liberty; money which should be spent in building up the most holy faith once delivered to the saints, and **[R4022 : page 205]** in putting down the strongholds of error, the golden calf of ignorance and superstition!

And undoubtedly many ministers and many of the more intelligent amongst the Lord's people of all denominations realize that Churchianity is merely a golden calf, unworthy of the reverence and worship accorded to it. Undoubtedly many of this more intelligent class, represented in Aaron, reluctantly join in the various sectarian practices and customs which have a form of godliness and deny its power. They should be more courageous if they would be overcomers; they must learn this lesson, and come out from among them and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing, (2 Cor. 6:17); and again, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins and receive not of her plagues." – Rev. 18:4.

MANY IDOLS IN CHRISTENDOM

While Churchianity is the idol which more nearly in our day corresponds to the golden calf, there are many more idols to which professed Christians are bowing the knees of their hearts. Chief amongst these is Mammon, the god of wealth, of money. O, how many forget the instructions of the Word, that we are to seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and to be content with such things as God's providence will grant us along these lines. How many are anxious to have something better in this world than God's providence has accorded them; how many have the love of money, of which the Apostle spoke in his day – the root of all evil, which some coveting after have stumbled and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. – 1 Tim. 6:10. **[R4023 : page 205]**

Yes, indeed! this idol has many votaries today, more perhaps than ever before, and the worship of Mammon is being

encouraged on every hand – the poor are almost despised, the wealthy highly esteemed. The successful worshipers of Mammon, who receive his marks of approval in prosperity, are everywhere welcomed in society and Churchianity. We are not denouncing wealth or the wealthy; we are reprehending the love, the idolatry of the wealthy, that it is set up as the standard of human ambition – nay, almost as the standard of Christian ambition; whereas, on the contrary, God has declared that not many great, not many wise, not many learned, not many noble, not many rich, will inherit the Kingdom; hence not many of the wealthy are identified with the true Israel of God.

There are other idols, too, of name and fame and pride, that call for their toll from their worshipers. Each one of these idols calls for its devotees to break off their golden earrings, their advantages, their riches of time and influence, etc., for their service. Does it not behoove every Israelite indeed to make an inspection of his own heart to see to what extent there are any idols there, and to cast them out, that his worship may be of sincerity for the Lord alone? This idol-breaking may properly include the idolatry of persons, whether it be of Luther or Calvin or Knox in the past or of earthly leaders in the present time. Saint John the revelator is represented as falling down to worship before the angel who showed him certain things in respect to the divine plan, and the angel is caused to reprove him for it, saying, "See thou do it not: I am of thy brethren... Worship God."

So every proper leader, in whatever degree of influence, should see to it that worship is not tendered to him without a rebuke. However well-intentioned the homage may be, it must be reproved, because there is but one proper object of adoration for the Lord's people – God himself; "Worship God." Fellow-creatures may be honored, respected, esteemed, as the Scriptures direct, "Honor to whom honor is due, tribute to whom tribute is due." But God is to be recognized as the source of all our

blessings, joys, advantages, comfort. If God has been pleased to make use of any of his children for the blessing of others, it would not be improper for us to rejoice in the Lord's providence and to acknowledge the same; but in every case the Lord must be recognized as the Giver of every good and perfect gift. Had he not given the aid through one channel or servant he could and would have given it through another. Hence to him belongs the praise of the glorious plan of salvation, and of our share therein and of our knowledge of it.

"HE BUILT AN ALTAR BEFORE IT"

Evils are progressive: one wrong leads to another. Thus, after the golden calf had been made the next thing in order was to make a golden altar before it to offer sacrifice to it. So it is in respect to the idols of Spiritual Israel. An altar always implies a sacrifice, and it is but the natural thing that we should sacrifice to whatever we set up in our hearts as our idol. As we have already pointed out, some hearts have many idols, others a few, and it is not difficult to determine which idols a man worships. The worship will be indicated by the sacrifice. Tell us the things to which a man or a woman sacrifices his or her best thoughts, best time, chief influence, and we can tell you readily the idol which he reverences most and before which he has the largest altar and sacrifices most.

Each should be most interested in examining this question from the standpoint of his own heart; each should say to himself, "To whom do I render the sacrifice of my heart? Where are my chief affections? To whom or to what do I render sacrifices of the most precious things I possess?" The laws of nature require that a certain proportion of our time be spent in sleep; with many a considerable proportion is necessary for earthly toil, for the procurement of the things needful and the things honest and necessary for the present life. A certain proportion is also necessary for our personal convenience, partaking of food and

care for our bodies. It would be easy to use the entire twenty-four hours in this way, for the tendency of our day is to greater and greater extravagance in every direction and to consider the luxuries of the past as the necessities of the present. Hence every hour of the twenty-four taken from the affairs of this life might be considered as in some sense of the word sacrificed.

Some divide their sacrifices, putting part upon the altars of their various idols; but the true Christian, enlightened by the Word of the Lord, must abandon all of these idols, and must realize that he has very little at most to present as a living sacrifice to the Lord. If he can save or redeem one hour a day or more, this should be recognized as a part of his reasonable service to the Lord and should be conscientiously devoted day by day if he would attain the divine **[R4023 : page 206]** favor and blessing for the life that now is and for that which is to come. As the steward of his gifts to the Lord he may use some of his time and influence in his own spiritual development along the lines of the divine Word. Another portion he may devote to the assistance of the brethren, building them up in the most holy faith, and thus strengthen incidentally his own faith. Other portions of this sacrificed time and means he may use in ministering to the sick or to assisting others along temporal lines, doing good to all men as he has opportunity, especially to the household of faith. But his sacrifices must not be made to persons nor things nor churchly systems, but to God, and be appropriately used according to his best ability to understand the divine will through the teachings of the divine Word.

THE BREAKING OF THE LAW

At the end of the forty days Moses came down from the mountain bearing the table of the Law written in stone, and, beholding the idolatry, he dashed the table of stone to pieces, symbolically representing the failure of Israel to keep the Covenant of the Law, and the impossibility of the fallen race ever

being justified by the Law Covenant. After Moses had reproved the people and chastened the more wilful and explained to them their sin more fully, he went up into the mountain again to the Lord, acting as their mediator. In this connection we have introduced to us the grandeur of Moses' character, his unselfishness, his love for his brethren in all their weakness. The Lord proposed to Moses to cut off Israel as a nation, and to make of Moses and his family the nation that he would bless as the seed of Abraham. But Moses, faithful to his trust as a mediator who had undertaken to represent the people before God and to represent God before the people, declined the Lord's offer, and pleaded for the people, as mediator.

All of this, we may be sure, was intended as a type of how Christ Jesus, as the better Mediator of the New Covenant, would be loyal to his trust and stand for and represent the whole human family before God faithfully, notwithstanding their sinful condition, alienation and disobedience. Moses' language is most pathetic – "And now wilt thou blot out their sin, and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of the book which thou hast written." As Moses here staked his own eternal existence for the benefit of the people, so the life of Christ was staked for the race whom he died to redeem, and whom he represents and will continue to represent as its Mediator until he shall, under the terms of the New Covenant, grant to Israel and to all mankind restitution and full opportunity to return to divine favor. The course of Moses was pleasing to the Lord, and as the Mediator for the people he was directed to lead them on and bring the faithful to the promised land. Nevertheless the people who shared in the wrong-doing received a measure of chastisement.

The spirit of Moses was not only typical of the Spirit of Christ, but illustrative also of the spirit of all who will be members of the Body of Christ. We, too, must have this spirit of love and devotion, not merely to the members of the Body of Christ, our

own Body, but a devotion to the mission, the work, to which in God's providence we have been called. "Ye know your calling, brethren." God has called us to be joint-heirs with his Son, to be the Bride, the Lamb's Wife, to be participators with him in the great work of mediating the New Covenant, and under its blessed provisions assisting and uplifting the world of mankind and leading them during the Millennial Age along the highway of holiness to absolute perfection and eternal life at its further end – so many as will obey. It is for us to have the spirit of Moses, the Spirit of Christ in respect to this matter – to so far as possible measure up to the glorious privileges and calling which are ours, and in the present time to do all in our power, in harmony with the Lord's providential leadings, for the blessing and uplifting of mankind in general, for their guidance in the right way, but especially to prepare ourselves for the glorious work of the coming age.

Chief amongst the elements of our preparation will be the spirit of sympathetic love which will enable us to be copies of our dear Master, who was kind to the unthankful and full of mercy and good fruits. Let us take this higher plane of thought in respect to our relationship to the world. Our Master declared, "Ye are not of the world, even as I [R4024 : page 206] am not of the world." We are members of the Christ – members of the great Mediator, undergoing schooling and preparation for the great work before us of leading the people into the promised land of God's favor and life eternal – Paradise restored. If we do not learn the necessary lessons, if we do not become copies of God's dear Son, in sympathy, in love, in benevolence toward the world, we will be rejected from membership in the glorious Body, the Kingdom class, as unfit, the non-elect. Let us, then, give diligence, and remember that the great lesson to be learned is that of love – for God, for the brethren, for our neighbors, yea, for our enemies. If this love abound in us it shall make us neither barren nor unfruitful in God's sight, and so through Christ an abundant entrance shall

be granted us into the everlasting Kingdom as associates with the King of kings and Lord of lords in his great work as the world's Mediator, the Mediator of the New Covenant, under which all the families of the earth are to be blessed.
