

Sermon – 15/01/2006 pm

Apostates Punished

Study Text: Deuteronomy 13

I the Lord your God am a jealous God (5:9). This declaration is attached to the second commandment. As *God of gods and Lord of lords*, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob tolerates no rivals. For this reason his people must never worship other gods, or be seen to be worshipping other gods. They must not use carved images of any form, they must not use places of their own choosing and they must not perform human sacrifice. Worship places of the Canaanites were to be utterly destroyed and every knowledge of their practices erased.

The people were to worship the Lord in the place of his choosing and in the manner he specified. They were not to add or take away from what the Lord prescribed (12:32 – this verse begins the next chapter in the Hebrew Bible).

The external threat to worship from the Canaanites was dealt with in the previous chapter – in theory at least. In this chapter the possibility of internal threat is dealt with. Treason or apostasy within the covenant community would threaten purity of worship. From the time of their deliverance this problem kept arising. At Mt Sinai itself some led the people into idolatry and to worship in the ways of other people. Moses reminded them of the golden calf they made (9:16). The Lord's jealous anger was aroused and he was going to destroy them but for the intercession of Moses.

The internal threat to maintaining pure worship within this covenant community is dealt with in this chapter before us. Danger may arise from three areas. Moses describes these and specifies action that must be taken to keep this evil at bay.

False Prophets

A prophet or a dreamer may arise, do some sign or wonder but then say '*let us go after other gods – which you have not known – and let us serve them*' (13:2). Such a prophet would be a false prophet for his words were contrary to the word of God.

Not all prophets are true prophets. Moses told the people how they were to distinguish between the true and false prophet – if what the prophet says does not come to pass then it is not the word of the Lord and he is a false prophet (18:21-22). But in this case, even if it comes to pass but it is contrary to the commands of the Lord then the prophet's word is false. No true prophet or man of God will ever say let us go after other gods. No true man of God will ever say let us make some images to help us in worshipping God. Even if such a man can perform signs and wonders he is not a man of God.

Remember that in Egypt the magicians were able to match some of the wonders God did by the hand of Moses (Exodus 7:22). Satan is powerful to perform counterfeit miracles and deceive many (II Thessalonians 2:9). Signs and wonders in themselves do not prove a man to be a man of God. The test must include adherence to the word of God.

No matter how many people a man heals or what great work he does, no matter how eloquent or persuasive he is; if he teaches what is contrary to the word of God as we find it in the Scriptures he is a false prophet. There are many such prophets today just as there were in Israel (*cf* I Kings 13). They turn people away from the Lord teaching them to worship other gods, usually money, man or some other material thing.

You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer for the Lord your God is testing you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (13:3). Clearly worshippers must know what the word of God says if they are to pass this test and refute the word of false prophets or false teachers. We must know the commands of the Lords and keep them. We must walk with the Lord and hold fast to him.

Moses commanded that the prophet or dreamer who entices the people of God into worshipping other gods be put to death (13:5). This is apostasy. This is high treason. This person is guilty of turning people against their king, against the one who chose them and delivered them out of bondage. They have broken covenant with their God and must be cut off. *You shall put away this evil from your midst* (13:5).

Paul uses similar language when dealing with the case of the man in the church at Corinth who had his father's wife (I Corinthians 5). He was even boasting in this immorality and the church with him. Such open immorality would lead to God's name being blasphemed among the Gentiles. This man must be excommunicated and handed over to Satan said Paul. *Put away from yourselves the evil person* (I Corinthians 5:13).

Family

An even greater danger to the exclusive and pure worship of YHWH may arise from within the immediate family. A brother, a son or daughter, or your wife may *secretly entice* you to serve other Gods said Moses (13: 6). Inter-marriage with Canaanites was forbidden for this very reason (7:3). But here the people are warned that even within their own ranks, even within their own households, someone may seek to lead them away from the Lord.

It is one thing to reject the false prophet but another to deal with apostasy within the family. You shall not listen or consent to what such a person says nor shall your eye pity him or conceal him (13:8), but *you shall surely kill him* (13:9). Love for God must rise above filial and matrimonial love.

Gideon lived in a day when the people of God had turned away to worship other gods. His own father had built an altar to Baal and also an Asherah pole. The Lord called upon Gideon to tear these down and restore true worship (Judges 6).

You have probably heard of 'honour killing' as carried out in one religion. Usually it is a son being called upon to kill his sister for committing adultery, in order to uphold the honour of the family. Rarely is a man subject to honour killing. Such a practice is unjust and is to be rejected. What Moses commanded was killing a family member or friend who secretly enticed you to worship other gods. It was the honour of God not the family that was threatened.

The Lord's jealous anger was aroused whenever his people turned to idolatry, and his judgment was severe. Should not those who love the Lord also be angry and hate those who hate the Lord (Psalms 39) ? Drastic action was commanded in response to such apostasy.

Jesus said if anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and his own life also he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26). Jesus demanded first place in the affection and devotion of his followers, just as the Lord did in the time of Moses. The love inherent in matrimonial and filial relationships must be overruled by love for God and obedience to his commands. If a marriage partner forces you to choose between them and Jesus who will you choose? (cf. I Corinthians 7:15). Or if a family member wants you to visit them rather than go to worship the Lord who will you choose? Beware the secret and subtle ways by which you may be enticed to turn from the Lord by those closest to you.

Town

The third situation Moses addresses is that of a whole group or town turning away from the Lord. Corrupt and worthless men (lit. sins of Belial) may lead their whole town in spiritual treason, saying ‘let us go and serve other gods’ (13:13). False prophets and dreamers often attract such base men who then avidly promote the rebellion. How was such a group of apostates to be dealt with?

Firstly careful inquiry must be undertaken as to the truth of what was heard (13:14). In condemning the apostate it is easy to condemn oneself of the same evil. Did not the Pharisees condemn Jesus, the Son of God for doing works by the power of Beelzebub? A sincere and more careful examination of Scripture would have prevented such self condemnation.

With a town a lot of people were involved. There was always the possibility of someone falsely accusing their enemies of apostasy, issuing in a pogrom. Such things are not unknown in the history of the church. A careful and diligent investigation had to be undertaken before any action was taken against this group.

If the evidence proved that the people of this town were guilty of worshipping other gods the punishment was as with any other – death. But in this case it was utter destruction. The people were put to the sword and all their possessions were to be burned before the Lord – in much the same way as the Canaanites were destroyed. The site of the town was left desolate, a ruin or heap for ever.

We may not see Christians taking such action against wholesale apostasy in our day, but that is not to say that the Lord is not acting himself. We are told that disasters are on the increase, even in previously Christian nations.

Are you ready for the Lord to test you to see if you love him more than any other? ‘Do you love me more than these’ Jesus asked Peter. ‘Do you love me, do you love me’ he asked a second and third time. Do you love Jesus more than your mother or father, do you love Jesus more than your spouse or your children? If you love me you will obey my commands said Jesus.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon