
Destruction of Idolatry > Reduction

Psalm 73:21-22

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Psalm 73:21-22 says,

*When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant; I was **like a beast toward you.***

This is a strange text we've chosen for our message tonight. But my hope is that as a result of both listening to and learning from Psalm 73:21-22 we all will "be living alert among idols in purity with purpose". <Survey slide. Recap series. Highlight subtitle.>

Tonight's message is held together in the follow way. We will start our time off by stating the premise I have tonight. A premise (sometimes referred to as a "hypothesis") is simply what I think to be true. It functions as the ground or basis for why I'm delivering this message. There is something I see both in the Bible and in ministry that holds my attention. We will start off the message by stating this concern.

Following the premise you will hear the purpose of the message. This is designed to make clear what I hope to see happen in the lives of the listeners as a result of God working through the preaching of the Word.

As the premise and purpose are in place we now are ready to hear simply the principle. This is the big idea of the message. It will be said in simple language. It will be condensed down to a memorable statement. This is the sentence I would for each of you to take home. If someone were to ask you "what was the preacher talking about on Sunday you could state this sentence. It would then function as a guideline for your conversation.

The principle will be stated in different ways so that you can get a good sense of what I'm talking about tonight. But our next step in the message needs to be proving the principle. It does not make something true by simply stating it. We at this point in the message will look at a sample of texts (though there are countless passages that support the thesis) to show the strength and soundness of the principle.

Lastly, to conclude our time together this evening, we will end on practice. This section of the message is designed to exhort and encourage each of us to put into practice what we know to be true. Here I will simply put forth a general outline urging us to fill in the particulars through daily repentance and faith in Christ.

So let's get started by first praying for help and then stating the premise of the message.

Premise

If we do not regularly hear and heed messages like tonight's though we are to be light to the nations we will inevitably become like the nations¹. <talk a bit on mission/morality>
Cf. Deut.4:5-8; Isa.49:6; Eph.5:7; 1Pet.2:11,12

¹ The play on words "light / like" comes from Tim Chester's excellent book *From Creation To New Creation*

Purpose

In light of how morality and mission go together, I want to preach tonight:

To give greater fuel to fire our desire – the target of my preaching is the heart. I aim at your thoughts and wants. For this message (and series) to be called a success, our desire must have been increased. Fuel to fire our desire is the starting point but not as an end in and of itself. “Desire to do what?” is the obvious follow up question.

...not to be conformed to the idols among us – The first part of the purpose in raising desire is negative. That is, that we will not be conformed to the idols among us is a goal along the way in this series. In tonight’s passage, we can easily notice the effects of idolatry; namely becoming a beast. To be so reduced by ruling desires that we are like a “ox eating grass” should be one of our motivations for purity. We will see in this message the Destruction of Idolatry. We are calling this Reduction, reduced to a senseless beast (more on this later).

...so that we will better fulfill our mission to the world – But as we work through the purpose of tonight’s message, we come to a more focused reason in our pursuit of purity. We want to be pure and disengage all idols but why? Our next segment to our purpose gives the answer. Morality makes possible mission. We are to live alert among idols in purity with purpose. And what we are saying about purpose is that it is our mission to the world. Certainly, there is much more to say about our purity and how it relates to our love for each other but this series has its eye upon mission, moving out in purity with purpose.

...namely to proclaim that all people everywhere must be conformed to Christ’s image – And this purity with purpose we are describing as a proclamation of the gospel. Our mission to the world is to proclaim that all people everywhere must be conformed to Christ’s image. The gospel believed recreates a person into what a human ought to be like, namely like Jesus. Our mission is to multiply and spread throughout this world the very image of Christ. Conversion (using Paul’s language in 1Thess.1) is *a turning to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come*. This series is aimed at helping us rid ourselves from idols (through repentance and faith) and grow in purity so that we will be more effective in loving the lost with the gospel.

...and all this for greater glory to God & greater gladness to us – Now we are at the bottom of all the layers to the purpose for this message. All the above description of tonight’s purpose serves to move forward two things that are not necessarily in tension with each other; His glory and our gladness. This message and our lives are to be to the glory of God and the good of our souls. We want to repent of our misplaced allegiance and affections and be committed to and contented in Jesus Christ our Lord. As a result of this type of purity (i.e. “the expulsive power of a new affection”) we will live with this type of purpose. We will understand clearly that under His rule we find our riches. We will long not merely for our gladness in God but that we will gladly help others get glad in God. As Piper says it, *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him*². This series is to help us see this reality and to talk with and live among the lost in a way that clarifies the gospel.

² Piper, John. *Desiring God, meditations of a Christian Hedonist*.

Principle

My hope is that there is sufficient clarity over what this message tonight and this November series is aiming to achieve. We are ready now to move to the basic idea of Psalm 73:21-22. In this slide I will put up succinct ways of saying the principle. Undoubtedly there are different ways and perhaps better ways of saying it. I'll leave that work to each of you. But suffice it to say that:

*We become what we worship*³. In his book "We Become What We Worship" Greg Beale builds the case that biblical theology of idolatry is seen in the dehumanizing of mankind. He starts with a particular passage (Isa.6) and then extends his exploration from Genesis to Revelation to discover that whatever we revere we resemble, either to ruin or restoration (his thesis).

As I read his book and scoured by Bible I was persuaded. As Ps.73:21-22 chillingly present it, as we take our heart off of Jesus and put it on other things destruction occurs. We take on characteristics that are sub-human. We are reduced to animal-like existence.

<talk about this reduction by presenting an 18 yr. composite sketch of man reduced to animal.>

Other ways of saying the effects of idolatry are many. <bring up the four on screen>

It's one thing to say the thesis and point to two verses in the Bible as evidence. But is it accurate? Was that what was going on in the mind of the Psalmist when he reflected upon his rebellion and wrote on it? Did he have other Scriptures in mind that shaped his figure of speech? What proof can we amass to persuade us that the thesis is right?

Proof

Beale's book persuaded me that "God has made humans to reflect him, but if they do not commit themselves to him, they will not reflect him but something else in creation. At the core of our beings we are imaging creatures. It is not possible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in creation (p.16). He combs through much Scripture to bring to light Israel's idolatry. He moves from Isaiah to the all important episode of the worship of the golden calf in Exodus 32 to demonstrate the characteristic of Israel's waywardness. This characteristic of their idolatry is that they "keep listening, but do not comprehend, keep looking but do not understand...[their] minds are dull, their ears stopped..."

He demonstrates that like the pattern of calf-worship in Ex.32, idolatry reduces the worshipper to its blind and dumb idol...like an ox eating grass (cf. Ps.106:20; Dan.4:32).

Notice a few passages that Beale exegetes to make his case that "we become what we worship".

Turn with me to Psalms 115:4-8.

Flip over to Isaiah 6:9-10.

Listen for Exodus imagery as I read other passages (Ps.106:20; Hos.4:7 [see Rom.1:21ff]; Jer.2:5,11; Dan.4:32)

³ Beale, G.K. *We Become What We Worship, a biblical theology of idolatry*. Beale's title of his brilliant book is his thesis. He explores this theme from Genesis to Revelation in compelling and persuasive depth and breath. What a read! The message tonight was birthed by Dr. Beale.

Can you hear in the Psalmist's imagery of becoming a beast (Ps.73:21-22) a possible allusion to Ex.32? As I was seeing whether or not this was so, I came across C.H. Spurgeon who pointed his church back to the Exodus scene when he expounded Ps.73:21-22.

Whether or not the Psalmist actually had Ex. in mind, the point remains the same. There are severe spiritual consequences to idol worship. These consequences can be summarized as "sensory organ malfunctioning" (a Beale way of saying it). Seeing but not seeing, hearing but not hearing, feeling but not feeling – you get the emphasis.

To be reduced by an activity that provides immediate gratification can be difficult to detect. That is, if making a good thing into an ultimate thing pays off immediately, it is hard to turn from the activity, substance or image and run to Christ for forgiveness and fresh joy. We must be convinced that idolatry has loathsome and lingering consequences.

Are you dull spiritually? Is it hard to read the Bible? Do you look at creation in wonder or whatever? Do you find your feelings flat when reading the Bible and noticing Jesus, his majesty and mercy, his authority, his warnings, his promises, his purity, his humanity?

Flat feelings when reading about the lost or hell or heaven or grace or sin or suffering – flat feelings demonstrate a reduced ability to recognize and realize the magnitude of Truth. Flat feelings when watching a toddler laugh or an elderly couple hold hands or geese flying in formation across a cloudless full moon or a teenager reporting about his improved report card or a puppy playing or... you get the picture?

If we are making a good thing function as an ultimate thing (that is, if we catch our hearts and perhaps our lips saying "without _____ I cannot live, I will not be happy, I will be frightened, I will not be worthy, I will cease in significant, I will become depressed, I will not follow Jesus, I will not be accepted, I will be unnoticed, I will lose my reason for living...

If we think thoughts like this, it is a clear indication that a ruling desire has thrown Jesus off the throne and now something else is king/ruling.

As this idolatry occurs notice how dull we become. What should we do in light of a message like this tonight?

Practice

To close I want to suggest ways of working this message into our lives. To put into practice God's Word is the only way to listen to God's Word (cf. James = be doers of the Word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves). <tease out implications to the applications>

- Be light to the nations not like the nations.
- "Light" is morality on mission.
- When light becomes dull check the heart.
- And always remember the Cross, repent of idolatry, rejoice in Christ and reflect Him to the lost world. <stand to recite Ps.73:24f>