

IDOLATRY -- THE FRUIT OF SIN

The Scripture speak many times of the fruit the Christian is to bear. John chapter 15:1-8 is a most compelling passage on bearing fruit. One of the most familiar passages is Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23 in contrast with the works of the flesh (verses 19-21). Jesus speaks many parables about bearing fruit, and says "he who reaps is gathering fruit for eternal life" (John 4:36). John the Baptist commanded the religious leaders who came to his baptism to "bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8). The epistles refer over and over to our bearing fruit. James calls it the "fruit of righteousness" (James 3:18), and Paul speaks of "the fruit of light" (Eph. 5:9). Something we seldom think of is there is the fruit of sin as well as the fruit of righteousness, and there is a danger of the Christian bearing this fruit. Jesus said "every good tree bears good fruit, but the rotten tree bears bad fruit" (Matt. 7:17). Paul states it in these words "For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death" (Rom. 7:5). The ultimate result of a life of sin is death: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23) and "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezk. 18:4), but "fruit for death" (Rom. 7:5) works in the life of man long before he experiences death, the final "fruit of sin." The final effect of sin is death, but there are many effects of sin before this final harvest. James D. G. Dunn, the Professor Emeritus of Divinity at the University of Durham, England, in his book, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* states: "Paul's assessment of the human condition in terms of the power of 'sin,' of what this power produces in individuals and society, has relevance not simply for personal spirituality but also for other analyses of society." This means that if the Christian bears the fruit of sin instead of the fruit of the Spirit, it affects, not only his life, but the society around him. Proverbs 16:7 says "If a man's ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him". When the church is faithful, (bearing the fruit of the Spirit) God changes men. When the church is unfaithful, (bearing the fruit of sin) the world, as well as the church, suffers.

Just as there are many factors affecting the growth and condition of any fruit, illustrated by the seed sown in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:18-24), there are many forces determining the kind of fruit we bear. This goes beyond human failure and transgression. There are spiritual powers that threaten the believer and affect his fruit bearing, many times resulting in his bearing the fruit of sin. Satan is said to be "the prince of the powers of the air" (Eph. 2:2), which means there are demonic powers with which the Christian must contend. In Romans 8:38, 39 Paul speaks of various spiritual beings who apparently have the potential to separate us from the love of God. He lists "death, life, angels, principalities, things present, things to come, powers, height, depth and *any other created thing*" as not being able to separate us from the love of God, but in this chapter he shows that 'we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh, for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live' (Rom. 8: 12, 13).

Jesus speaks of "the devil *and his angels*" (Matt. 25:41) and spent much of his ministry dealing with the demon possessed. Paul had to contend with a "*messenger* (same word as "angel) of Satan" (II Cor. 12:7). The spiritual powers that threaten believers are listed in Colossians 1:16; Ephesians 1:20-21 and Ephesians 6:12. They are: "thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities, rulers, powers, world forces of darkness and spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places." No wonder we see so much "fruit of sin" being lived out in the idolatry of the world today.

Herbert Schlossberg in his book *Idols For Destruction* asserts that "when civilization turns idolatrous, it's people are profoundly changed by that experience. In a kind of reverse sanctification, the idolater is transformed into a likeness of the object of his worship." He is saying the same thing the Psalmist said in Psalm 115:8: "Those who make idols will become like them, everyone who trusts in them." This says that human conduct is ultimately governed by what a society worships. This perhaps explains the decay and corruption we see all about us. Modern man has made money, power, leisure, sex and fashion his gods. These gods control his actions and lifestyles. Hosea 8:4 states: "With their silver and gold they make idols for their own destruction" (Hosea 8:4). This says judgment is inseparable from idolatry. Human actions have moral consequences. There is a principle of moral accountability in the world. For example the love of money (idol of mammon) destroys those who worship it its altar (I Tim. 6:9, 10). The idol of sex becomes the instrument of plague and death to those who bow before it (Rom 1:27). The decision to deny the true God results in a depraved mind (Rom. 1:28). The beast that is worshipped (Rev. 13:3,4) enslaves those who worship it (verses 16, 17). Isaiah 44:9-17 shows how ridiculous idolatry is. In the light of this scripture and considering the words of the second commandment, "you shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth, you shall not worship them or serve them..." we may conclude that no Christian is likely to carve out an image and worship it as a god. We might excuse ourselves on the basis that we do not use religious statues, crucifixes, paintings and icons as is prevalent in Roman Catholicism. On that point we might say the Scriptures do not forbid engravings, picturing or art work in general. The garments of the priests, the mercy seat and the whole tabernacle was heavily ornamented. These emblems were never to be used in acts of worship because man can only approach God on God's terms. There can be no other mediation between God and man except that which is ordained by God. What we need to realize is that we do not need statues and images to be guilty of idolatry. Paul states in Colossians 3:5 that covetousness (greed) is idolatry, and he declares in Ephesians 5:5 that "no covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." Graven images in worship can be mental pictures, concepts, ideas, understandings and traditions of what God is like, what He must do and what we must do to be pleasing to Him. We do not need statues and images to be guilty of idolatry. Our most evil idol is not something seen, rather something we have developed in our mind. We want to reduce

God to something we can handle. So we have developed mental pictures, concepts, ideas, understandings, and traditions of what God is like and what He must do. Many modern church members have reduced faith to magic (even the Lord's Supper can become a magic formula or ritual). Many believe and teach that if we press the right button...confess the right confession, quote the right Scripture, think the right thought, God will respond. We turn the promise of God that He will sustain us in every difficulty into the demand that we have no difficulty. This idolatry will destroy us.

Nancy Brewka Clark in *Faith in the Flesh, Secular Society's Preoccupation With Life* shows just how real modern idolatry is. She says: "the contemporary interest in physical exercise is not simply a way of achieving or retaining health, but is a kind of secular religion. As churches empty, health clubs flourish, as traditional fervor wanes, attention to the body waxes. In other words, as the baby boomers approach middle age, a yearning toward perpetual youth flares up and denial of the biological takes the form of aerobics. Fitness is the new path to immortality. The pain of the workout is the new penance, the monk's hair shirt has been replaced by the modern's sweatshirt."

In Romans chapters one and two Paul discusses the effects, or fruit, of the power sin in the ways it manifests itself in the idolatry of both the pagan Gentiles and religious Jews. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul shows how the fruit of sin was manifested in the idolatry of the Gentiles. The refusal to honor God as God (1:21) results in the worship of images of humans and animals (1:23, 25). The paganism of the Gentiles was no excuse for their idolatry, for God had revealed Himself in such a way that they should have known and worshipped God. So they were not victims of ignorance and blindness not of their own making because God had revealed Himself by making His eternal power and divine nature to be understood through His creation (verse 20). Verse 21 states that "they knew God" This knowledge of God which they had through God's revelation in creation cannot be equated with the knowledge we have in Christ. This knowledge is not enough to save them but rather to condemn them, because they did not live up to it. Had they lived up to this revelation they had they would have been comparable to the Jew for Paul states: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus" (Rom. 2:14-16). In this passage the fateful words "God gave them up" is repeated three times. When man does not turn to God, based upon the revelation he has, God punishes him by giving him up to sin. The idolatry discussed in this chapter is not something peculiar to the pagan culture of that day, but is a vivid description of our modern society. If God held a pagan society, who had only a revelation of God in creation, responsible for their actions, and passed the judgment of "giving them up" to their lusts and degrading passions, what will be the outcome of a society today that has the revelation of God in His Son, and is a mirror image of those described in this chapter?

In Romans 2:1-29 Paul identifies religious boasting to be a primary fruit of sin, and the Jews were as guilty of idolatry as the Gentiles whom they condemned. The Jews developed confidence

that God is only Israel's God and their possession of the law and the practice of circumcision was what made them acceptable to God. In the New Testament the Jewish religion was not the worship of a false god or graven images like the Gentiles, although they had been guilty of descending into the same idolatry as the Gentiles in their embracing the pagan idols of the heathen. An example of this was the episode of the golden calf in the wilderness (Exodus 32:1-6). Their idolatry was basically redefining God and the true faith. To redefine God and His word from who He reveals Himself to be and what His standards are is a form of idolatry or the fruit of sin. It was not merely the construction of a golden calf, it was their denoting the calf with God's covenantal name, "This is your God, O Israel that brought you out of the land of Egypt" and "Tomorrow is a feast to the Lord" (Exodus 32:4, 5). This was idolatry and an example of the fruit of sin. Jeremiah stated that the fathers in the wilderness "went far from me, went after emptiness, and became empty" (Jer.2:5, 6). Several years ago the German Theologian Karl Barth wrote in *Church Dogmatics*: "From the standpoint of revelation religion is clearly seen to be a human attempt to anticipate what God in His revelation wills to do and does do. It is the attempted replacement of the divine work by human manufacture."

An example of this religious idolatry is seen in the temple worship of the Old Testament. The promise of God to David when he desired to build the temple was that Solomon would "build a house for My name" (II Sam. 7:13). After Solomon built the temple God said, "I have consecrated this house which I have built by putting My name there forever and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually" (I Kings 9:3). However by Isaiah's time the temple had been converted into an apparatus to the service of idolatry. In a time when Israel had become a desperately wicked nation, the temple worship of the Creator of the universe flourished. The people continued with multiplied sacrifices, burnt offerings, prayers and festivals of which God said: "I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assemblies. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me. I am weary of bearing them" (Isaiah 1:13, 14). From these verses we see that religious institutions can become an active agent in promoting idolatry or even become an idol itself and people confuse the means of worship with the object of worship. In his book *No God But God Oz Guinness* quotes Alexander Solzhenitsyn as saying: "Idolatry today is the idol of good and useful things from our modern world that, in the form of powerful modern myths, have been allowed to become distortions of the gospel and substitutes for faith in God. In the Biblical view, anything created...anything at all that is less than God and most especially the gifts of God...can become idolatrous if it is relied upon inordinately until it becomes a full-blown substitute for God and, thus an idol. The first duty of believers is to say yes to God, the second is to say no to idols."

It is no accident that the first two commandments deal with idolatry. "You shall have no other gods before Me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol" (graven image). The first commandment is violated by raising anything less than God to the level of God Himself. The second commandment is violated by reducing the God who is God to anything less than God. Idolatry, the fruit of sin, is when we expect God to act as we think God should act. This is what Jesus called "bad fruit".