

Three Dangerous Enticements

Deuteronomy 13:1–18

by Felton Spraggins

“ . . . But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you. . . . ” (13:1–18).

How are people tempted to become idolatrous? In 13:1–18, three reasons are given for the enticement to idolatry. Moses first described those temptations which would come to them as a result of a sign or wonder from a false prophet (13:1–5). Second, the family or a loved one could influence them to yield to temptation (13:6–11). The home may become a place of temptation or a stumbling block, rather than a stepping stone. Third, the temptation of idolatry could be brought about as a result of peer pressure (13:12–18). When all the inhabitants of a city have adopted the teachings of others, can everyone in a community be wrong? Can there be mass apostasy? The answer is, “Yes.”

ENTICEMENTS FROM FALSE PROPHETS

The first source of temptation for Israel to become idolatrous could be a “prophet” or a “dreamer of dreams.” Moses told them,

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you saying, “Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them” (13:1, 2).

Prophets were highly esteemed among the people and were a legitimate means of revela-

tion in Israel. A prophet, Moses, had himself promised that God would raise up another prophet after his death for the people to follow (18:15).

A prophet’s credibility would be increased if he gave a sign or wonder which came to pass as he had predicted. Miraculous workings *alone* were never meant to be a proof of truth from God. Moses warned the people that the standard of truth must not be a sign or wonder or any area of human experience. The standard of truth was to be God’s word. If the prophet’s predictions came true, but his message contradicted God’s command, Israel was to trust God’s word rather than the sign. No true prophet would ever encourage the Israelites to break the first commandment, which was to love God wholeheartedly (5:7; 6:5; 13:3). The prophets of God called men to God.

Jesus warned of the same type of enticement. He discussed the prophets who would show great signs and wonders that appeared to be authentic so as to fool even the elect at the destruction of Jerusalem (Matthew 24:24). Many today are looking for a sign or miracle rather than holding to the standard of truth as Jesus and His apostles taught. Today we also face dreamers of dreams, seers, and pretenders to inspiration.

The testing of any prophetic utterance today is to be in accordance with our Lord’s warning: “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. . . .” (Matthew 7:15, 16). The testing of their fruits includes their conformity to the teachings of

Scripture, of Christ, and of His apostles in both content and in character. Paul emphasized that a test of any man claiming spirituality or prophetic gifts is that he “recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord’s commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Corinthians 14:37, 38).

Israel was to take three lines of action if a false prophet aspired to turn Israel toward other gods:

First, they were not to listen to the words of that prophet. “You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (13:3).

Even though that prophet did make accurate predictions to suggest that he was a prophet of the Lord, if he advised idolatry, he was to be considered a false prophet. The man who possessed the ability to foretell the future, from whatever source, could not be Yahweh’s prophet if he sought to destroy the allegiance of Yahweh’s people to Him. The Old Testament covenant was irrevocable.

Second, Israel was to continue to walk after the Lord, to reverence Him, to keep His commandments, and to cling to Him. “You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him” (13:4).

Each enticement was to be viewed as a test: “to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (13:3). The most effective way to overcome any temptation is shown in these words: “follow,” “fear,” “keep,” “listen,” “serve,” and “cling” (13:4).

Third, the false prophet was to be put to death. Moses said,

But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you (13:5).

Any prophet who advocated the worship of other gods was as false as one who taught rebellion against Yahweh and was to be slain. The foundation for this action was that Israel was to be devoted to God, and any religious leader who

advised people to consider idolatry was to be executed. The death of the false prophet would stop the spread of the infection and purge out the evil from the midst of Israel.

Peter warned that just as false prophets arose among the people in the Old Testament, so had false teachers risen among them, “even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (2 Peter 2:1). While we are not to put to death the false prophets, we are to denounce error (Titus 1:9–11), contend for the truth (Jude 3), and not become partakers with them in their evil deeds (2 John 9, 10; 1 Timothy 5:22).

ENTICEMENTS FROM LOVED ONES

Moses next spoke of the most painful of all temptations, the temptation of idolatry by a loved one, whether a relative or a friend:

If your brother, your mother’s son, or your son or daughter, or the wife you cherish, or your friend who is as your own soul, entice you secretly, saying, “Let us go and serve other gods” (whom neither you nor your fathers have known, of the gods of the peoples who are around you, near you or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other end) (13:6, 7).

Everyone understands the influence of relatives and friends in leading us away from the true God. Love for our family or friends must never take precedence over our devotion to God. The claims of God are superior to human affections. God deserves and must have the whole, not a portion. Jesus said, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me” (Matthew 10:37).

The response to idolatry from a close relative or a friend is to be sixfold. Moses outlined their response:

You shall not yield to him or listen to him; and your eye shall not pity him, nor shall you spare or conceal him. But you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people (13:8, 9).

God’s laws were designed to overrule human feelings. No tolerance of idolatry was to be permitted even within the family. In the death of one from the family unit, the family must show that they neither had been nor wished to be par-

takers in the evil deed. They were not to be partakers of another's sin (1 Timothy 5:22).

How easy it would be to dismiss the behavior of a loved one. The tempter would place his family or friend under enormous pressure. But to yield was to lose God's blessing. To stand fast was to lose human affection and to deal with the tempter according to the law.

In the execution of those worthy of death under the law, the accuser (the witness) was to be the first to lay his hands on the guilty party and to cast the first stone (13:9; 17:7; Leviticus 24:10-14), thereby testifying to the truth of his testimony. This eliminated the haphazard accusation made by individuals. The accuser had to have the courage and strength of conviction to follow through with his charges. If he would not, he was not to make any charges. The participation of the rest of the people showed their allegiance to the Lord and their hostility toward anything that might endanger their allegiance. The result of such drastic action would be that "all Israel will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such a wicked thing among you" (13:11).

This principle can be applied today. The principle of the accuser or witness instigating the corrective action is definitely taught by Christ (Matthew 18:15-20; Luke 17:3, 4; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19, 20). Not only is the accuser responsible if he realizes that his brother has sinned, but the one who realizes that he has sinned against his brother is also responsible (Matthew 5:23-36). The principle is that if something is seen as being in need of correction or forgiveness, immediate action should be initiated toward that end.

ENTICEMENTS FROM PEER PRESSURE

The third point of danger for yielding and becoming idolatrous could come from public sentiment. This would involve a general turning from God, a wholesale abandonment of God's truth. Moses explained:

If you hear in one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you to live in, anyone saying that some worthless men have gone out from among you and have seduced the inhabitants of their city, saying, "Let us go and serve other gods" (whom you have not known), then you shall investigate and search out and inquire thoroughly. And if it is true and the matter established that this abomination has been done among you, and you shall surely

strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it and all that is in it and its cattle with the edge of the sword (13:12-15).

If a city was overtaken by idolatry through the influence of certain "worthless men" ("base fellows," ASV; RSV; "children of Belial," KJV), the entire city was to be destroyed. The expression "base fellows" or "children of Belial" is translated from a Hebrew word meaning "without worth." These base fellows were worthless and devoted to worthless ends. They were like leaven in flour and could "leaven the whole lump." They were sons of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2).

Before the city could be destroyed, Israel was to investigate the matter thoroughly. Full inquiry was important as a principle of justice preceding punishment. If the report was confirmed that idolatry was being taught or practiced, the city was to be utterly destroyed.

In destroying the city, the people were to have no tolerance toward idolatry within that city, and even the property could not be confiscated as the spoils of war (13:16, 17). The city was subject to the ban of total destruction; it was to be as a burnt offering devoted unto Jehovah. Nothing was to be salvaged. It was to remain a heap forever, never to be rebuilt (13:16). The phrase "it shall be a ruin forever" signifies that the town was to be an eternal heap and every time an outsider saw it they would be reminded of God's judgment on idolatry. Also, the fact that the city was to be destroyed and could never be rebuilt eliminated improper motivation on the part of those who were to carry out the punishment.

CONCLUSION

The removal of false prophets, loved ones, or cities that were leading the Israelites to idolatry showed those who acted in this way that God's people would disown them and would collectively destroy them. It also illustrated that God's nation as a whole was involved in its spiritual life; each one was required to be a participant in its maintenance.

These commands are not directed to Christians today, since we do not live under the law of Moses. But the basic principle applies. Anything that turns the Christian from following God must be dealt with quickly and severely (Matthew 18:8, 9).