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**Ezekiel 14:1-5, NRSVue.**

*14 Certain elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. <sup>2</sup> And the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>3</sup> Mortal, these men have taken their idols into their hearts and placed their iniquity as a stumbling block before them; shall I let myself be consulted by them? <sup>4</sup> Therefore speak to them, and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: Any of those of the house of Israel who take their idols into their hearts and place their iniquity as a stumbling block before them and yet come to the prophet, I the LORD will answer those who come with the multitude of their idols, <sup>5</sup> in order that I may take hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, all of whom are estranged from me through their idols.*

**Classic Cars and Expensive Guitars: *Idolatry Today.***

There are two men that I met, at very separate times and in very separate places, who had a collection of things that they held dear to them. The first was a man I knew many years ago in Los Angeles who collected classic cars. He didn't restore them himself: he either bought them fully restored or he paid other people to do the work. He had about eight of them and the thing that stressed him out the most was that he had run out of places to store them. He had bought a house in a somewhat remote area to give him space to build a huge garage. But it was now full, and he didn't have any more land to build on, and he couldn't afford to move or to rent more space somewhere. He had all of his assets tied up in the

house, the garage, and the cars. He did get a lot of pleasure from these cars. He spent much time looking at them and would take one of them out on a short drive almost daily. He never took them on the freeway or on busy streets, and he never parked them anywhere, for fear of them being damaged. He would simply drive them around his neighborhood. His wife drove a nice car, but just one, and a new car, and her car was always parked on the street.

The second man is someone I met in Colorado a few years ago. He owned a wall of expensive guitars. I never saw them, but as I recall, he had six of them. He was a retired musician, retired not because he had decided he no longer wanted to play guitar, but because he had developed a neurological problem that caused him to have a severe loss of dexterity with his fingers. He simply couldn't play anymore. He had bought the guitars one at a time, over the course of a few decades. The first one had been a gift from an older musician to him when he was only fourteen. That was when he started playing. He made a living as a musician, in Los Angeles, and gradually grew his collection, with each subsequent guitar tending to be more expensive than the one before it. I met him in the hospital where he was being treated for this neurological condition. Although he had had a thirty-year career as a studio and stage musician, he was somewhat younger than me. After he had been forced to stop playing, he and his wife had

moved to Colorado and bought a home. He told me that he had considered selling them all, but his wife insisted he keep them, that they didn't need the money. So, he had them put up on a wall, just like he had had them in L.A. He said that it didn't make him sad to look at them, that he had accepted his condition. Almost every day, when he looked at those guitars hanging there, he remembered playing them. He said they were good memories that warmed him.

It's time to talk about something biblical. Here is Exodus 32:19-20:

*<sup>19</sup> As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses's anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain. <sup>20</sup> He took the calf that they had made, burned it with fire, ground it to powder, scattered it on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.*

We know the famous story of Moses coming down the mountain carrying the two stone tablets, with the commandments of the Old Covenant engraved on them. While he was gone, talking to God, his people had become impatient. They were afraid that Moses might have abandoned them. So, they reverted to practices that they had picked up from their pagan oppressors in Egypt. They made an idol.

It is difficult for us as modern people to understand the persistent evil that repeatedly befell the Chosen People of the Hebrew Scriptures. They were trying to make a massive transition from pagan gods that were numerous and human like, gods that fought and were often corrupt and had great but limited powers, to a single, invisible, intangible, all powerful God. To make it all the harder, they

were surrounded by cultures that worshipped pagan gods, and in fact, directed their worship toward the idols that represented these gods. The difference between the idols and the gods became blurred. Another thing that made things difficult for the Israelites is that they saw some attractive things in these idols, besides them being tangible and often beautiful. There were gods like the Canaanite fertility god Baal. One form of fertility that Baal promised was agricultural. The Israelites themselves were constantly living only marginal lives, with a lack of rain threatening a poor yield and starvation. The idea of worshipping Baal was very tempting.

Psalm 135 is addressed to a congregation of people who have come together to worship in the Temple. The Psalm starts out by describing the might of God, the beauty and power of the earth, skies, and seas that God created. It talks about the protection that God gave the people as they made their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. It then talks about the problems that arise when people, instead of worshipping God, worship idols.

Here is part of Psalm 135:

<sup>15</sup> *The idols of the nations are silver and gold,  
the work of human hands.*

<sup>16</sup> *They have mouths, but they do not speak;  
they have eyes, but they do not see;*

<sup>17</sup> *they have ears, but they do not hear,*

*a nose, but there is no breath in their mouths.*

<sup>18</sup> *Those who make them  
and all who trust them  
shall become like them.*

This was the threat that faced the idol worshippers. The Israelites were told that the idols they built were in truth powerless, that they were blind and deaf, that they were not alive. And if they persisted in making idols, they would become just like them. This was a metaphor, of course: the threat was to become no more spiritually alive than those idols. That was the unstable way in which they lived for approximately 1,500 years, from the time of the Exodus to the birth of Jesus. The Israelites struggled to worship the single, invisible, difficult to visualize, and all mighty God, but repeatedly fell back to the ways of their neighbors who worshipped idols. They would go from honoring their covenant with God to become spiritually blind and deaf and lifeless.

Consider this from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21:

<sup>12</sup> *Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.* <sup>13</sup> *He said to them, "It is written,*

*'My house shall be called a house of prayer,'  
but you are making it a den of robbers."*

This is another famous passage. The people who attended the Temple were required to make offerings. Poor people might only offer a dove, never a large

animal. A wealthier person would offer perhaps a lamb. But to buy that animal, you had to use Temple money, shekels. However, the money that common people had, especially the poor, was Roman or Greek. They had to exchange this money for proper Temple money before buying an animal to sacrifice. The folks who exchanged their money and sold them animals charged a hefty fee simply to exchange common money for shekels. That's one of the reasons Jesus was so angry. They were using their position as Temple authorities to rip off poor people.

Here's the subtly behind this scene. In ancient times, during the time of Moses, the Prophets, the Judges, and people like King David, the problem was people turning to worshipping idols. But by the time of Christ, the Israelites had become the Jews, and they were more secure in their belief in a single, invisible, omniscient God. They weren't worshipping golden calves. However, they had found a new kind of idol. They were worshipping tradition and form and the outward practices of their faith. Rituals had become a new sort of idol. That is what Jesus was reacting to. He wanted people to come to the Temple to honor God, not the trappings of faith. Here is a passage from Matthew, Chapter 15:

**15** *Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, <sup>2</sup> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." <sup>3</sup> He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? <sup>4</sup> For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' <sup>5</sup> But you*

*say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father.'*<sup>\* 6</sup> *So, for the sake of your tradition, you nullify the word of God.*<sup>7</sup> *You hypocrites!*

The Pharisees, who were dedicated to strictly enforcing written law and tradition, get angry because Jesus' Apostles aren't following the law that says to wash one's hands before eating. Jesus counters, saying that they are supposed to be bound by the written law of God to honor their fathers and mothers, but they are so caught up in tradition that they pour their assets into religious rituals and end up abandoning their aging mothers and fathers. The point is that the Pharisees are so caught up in the outward practices of their faith that they have forgotten the actual laws of God.

The very ancient Israelites tended to fall into a recurring pattern of worshipping idols, in imitation of their pagan neighbors. By the time of Christ, wealthy and powerful people, especially leaders of the faith, had begun to worship form over content. They didn't make offerings to God to honor God, to connect with God, to bring God into their lives. They did it to make themselves look holy, to make money, and to satisfy their need to worship something and so feel secure.

This pattern has evolved further. Today, we have new idols. People certainly don't worship pagan gods or golden calves. Americans do not worship the rituals of faith. People now worship the products of the consumer world around them.

The new golden calves are smart phones and screen time and social media. They are empty spiritually and they use man-made stuff to give them a sense of belonging, to give meaning to their lives, to connect somehow with the world that God made. They have substituted pagan gods for celebrities. They will worship corrupt, selfish, caustic people simply because they are in some narrow sense “famous”. People today are like those Pharisees. They are privileged, spoiled, and totally lacking in spiritual depth.

During our services, we have an offertory. We offer up our donations, and as we do so, we turn to the cross. We are not worshipping the cross. We work hard to always remember that the cross is only a symbol, only a reminder of God and our relationship to God. The service itself is not God. We come here to help each other build our faith, to develop a community of faith, and to root ourselves in a shared life with God. We know that if we sit through a service every Sunday, but we do not love our neighbor, if we are unforgiving, if we are selfish, if we are cruel, then we’ve squandered our time in church.

Let’s get back to the two men I met. The one man loved his cars, but only because he could own them. He never worked on them. He didn’t use them for transportation. He made his wife park on the curb. The cars were idols.



But the musician, those guitars were a part of his identity. He had played each and every one of them. He had recorded with them, stood on stages holding them. He felt a little guilty about the assets that were tied up in them. When he looked at those guitars on his wall, he didn't get pleasure from simply owning them. They were a part of him. They were a key to a past life that illness had caused him to lose. He told me that he was deeply grateful that his wife did not resent him owning these expensive instruments that he couldn't play anymore. He said that he had once told her that he should sell them because at this point, they were just art on the wall of the room that would have been a studio if he had been able to play. He said that she said no, they are not art. They are symbols of your life and something that you love.

Here is the beginning of Chapter 14 of Ezekiel:

**14** *Certain elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. <sup>2</sup> And the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>3</sup> Mortal, these men have taken their idols into their hearts and placed their iniquity as a stumbling block before them; shall I let myself be consulted by them? <sup>4</sup> Therefore speak to them, and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: Any of those of the house of Israel who take their idols into their hearts and place their iniquity as a stumbling block before them and yet come to the prophet, I the LORD will answer those who come with the multitude of their idols, <sup>5</sup> in order that I may take hold of the hearts of the house of Israel, all of whom are estranged from me through their idols.*

Ezekiel, acting as a prophet, as a conduit between God and God's people, is warning his people about what happens when idols take over their lives, when

they begin to worship things made by humans. Notice that he says: *“these men have taken their idols into their hearts and placed their iniquity as a stumbling block before them”*. People have taken their idols and filled their hearts with them, taken them into the very center of their being, made them the most important things in their lives. As a result, there is no place left for God within them. As they try to walk through the Kingdom of God, they are unable. Their idols are stumbling blocks, causing them to fall out of grace.

As I sat with the musician in his hospital room, and after he had told me all about the wall of guitars in his home, his wife entered. He introduced me. She smiled and took my hand. Then she asked her husband if there was any news about his treatment plan. They talked about that for a moment. Then this man told his wife that he had just been telling me all about the guitars. She smiled and said that she had just been looking at them before coming over to the hospital. She then told a story about one of them, an older, valuable Les Paul, that he had played on stage with some famous jazz musician, which was unusual for him, because he mostly did rock’n’roll. She said that as she was looking at that guitar, she remembered sitting there watching the joy on his face as he played alongside this jazz master. She smiled warmly as she told this story. This is the right reason to own things. That guitar was part of their lives. That guitar was not an idol.