

But I Put it Away!

1 Samuel 7: 2-4

[2] It was a long time, twenty years in all, that the ark remained at Kiriath Jearim, and all the people of Israel mourned and sought after the LORD. [3] And Samuel said to the whole house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths and commit yourselves to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." [4] So the Israelites put away their Baals and Ashtoreths, and served the LORD only.

Most of us who've been in the church for any amount of time know the story of Israel. They had a definite cycle they followed. Over and over again they served God for a time, then followed false gods. After a while the going got tough so they cried out to the One and only True God and He rescued them. Because of their gratitude, they followed Him, but it wasn't more than a generation or two later that the cycle of unfaithfulness began again.

As I read these verses in Samuel, I wonder if there are a few words here that give us a clue to Israel's problem. For 20 years the Ark of the Covenant, God's presence as far as the Israelites were concerned, was at Kiriath Jearim. The entire time it was there the people of Israel followed God. It must have looked to Samuel like they were finally sincere in their desire to worship their Creator because Samuel challenged them to get rid of their foreign gods. He told them that if they really wanted to completely return to God, they should "rid themselves" of the idols and gods of their enemies.

At first read, it looks like verse 4 tells us they did just as Samuel commanded; however if we look at it just a bit closer, we see that they only half obeyed. The text says, "the Israelites put away" the false gods. When I think of "get rid of" I imagine a garbage can or a fire. On the other hand "putting away" brings to mind a closet. The Israelites didn't dispose of them forever, they put them on a shelf in case they needed them again. And as we know from history, the day came when they once again turned their backs on the one who delivered them time after time after time and turned instead to the powerless statues and idols of wood and stone.

It made me stop and think, "are there 'idols' in my life that I've put high on a shelf but haven't completely rid my life of?" And can I "commit myself to the Lord and serve Him only" if I have these hidden treasures to fall back on? Perhaps we've even forgotten they're there, but sure enough if we don't completely get rid of them, at some point we'll feel compelled to clean out that closet and find those gods that keep tripping us up.

I'm not sure why they are so attractive. After all, we've seen, we know the power of the Almighty God. We really WANT to follow Him. But much like the Israelites, we find ourselves giving our devotion to those idols instead of our Father. The god of scheduling, jobs and time management demands that we shorten the moments we spend with Christ. The god of entertainment and leisure knows how much we enjoy television, computer, video games and the like. This god promises fun and even delivers to a point. Much like the Israelites, it's easy to get sucked into these vices without even realizing we're turning our back on the One God who actually cares about us.

Much the same way the god of money, family and things can blind us to our need to spend time with the Omnipotent One. Most of these idols seem innocent and good. Stop and think about it. Back hundreds of years ago, I'm sure it made sense to worship the sun and the rain. After all, humankind learned early that these two resources were necessary to grow food. Now that we're aware these are just creations of the same God who created us, it seems foolish to bow to solar, wind or water power. However, when we spend more time at our jobs than with our family and more time with our family than with the One who gave us these gifts, we run the risk of being as foolish as those who worship the sun god.

Think for a moment about the gods you've followed in your life. Have we truly ridded our lives of them? Or are they in a closet, up on a shelf behind our Bibles just waiting until we feel as though we need them again?