Samaritans, Bad and Good

2 Kings 17:7-17, 24-41 (text); John 4:1-42 (excerpts); Luke 10:25-37;
Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 34
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Hordes of people clamoring, pushing, stretching their necks through sweltering heat or pouring even just to get a glimpse of the Black Nazarene. For this wooden idol has magical powers to cure diseases and send material blessings to them. Every January, millions of Filipinos display this blatant and flagrant idolatry against the God of heaven, giving worship, glory and praise to an idol who cannot see, hear, talk, or walk.

These Filipinos are no different from the Samaritans in 2 Kings 17. In our text, the Samaritans “feared the Lord but also served their own gods” (verse 33). Just like this ancient people, Filipinos who worship idol-gods think that they are worshipping the true God of heaven and earth, but as verse 35 says, “They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow the statutes or the rules or the law or the commandment that the Lord commanded.” How did the Samaritans, who were descendants of ten of the twelve tribes of Israel, come to this false religion?

In spite of God’s warnings against worshipping the idols of their pagan neighbors, the Samaritans “feared other gods and walked in the customs of the nations” (verses 7-8). So in 722 B.C., God judged them by sending the powerful Assyrians to conquer them. Since it was the policy of the Assyrians to resettle the people of conquered nations, they carried away the Jews into exile all over the empire, and then repopulated Samaria with peoples from other nations. Many of the remaining Jews married into those peoples, so they lost their distinct identity as Jews. They also lost their Jewish religion because they worshipped the idol-gods of these nations.

Our text reminds us that God demands exclusive worship. “You shall not forget the covenant that I have made with you. You shall not fear other gods, but you shall fear the Lord your God” (verses 38-39), a restatement of the First Commandment of the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments. This First Commandment is also known as the root commandment, since obeying the other nine commandments spring from fearing and worshipping God alone with all our heart, mind and strength.

Today, we meditate on three stories about Samaritans and their false and true worship as they have a bearing on us today. They are not just moral lessons for us, but more so, they show us that we too are idolaters who need Christ to deliver us from our idolatries. As we meditate on the biblical teachings of Lord’s Day 34 of the Heidelberg Catechism, our theme is “Samaritans, Bad and Good,” in three points:

(1) The ancient Samaritans—False Worshippers of False Gods

(2) The Samaritan woman and her people—True Worshippers of the Only True God

(3) The Samaritan Who Redeemed Us from Idolatry
False Worshippers of False Gods

Even before the Assyrians resettled pagans into the northern kingdom of Israel, the Israelites already had become a syncretistic people, worshipping a mixture of gods. In verses 7-17, their idolatry is described in great detail. They worshipped Yahweh, the one true God of heaven, but they also brought in the idols of their pagan neighbors: Molech, Baal, Astoreth, and the stars of heaven. They built high places everywhere for worshipping pillars, Asherah poles, and two metal calves. They offered their children to the idols as sacrifices. They used omens and divination.

Baal was the sun-god and storm-god, the supreme God of the Canaanites. Molech was a god to which pagans offered their children as sacrifice, often by burning. Ashtoreth was the goddess of fertility, love and war, and Asherah poles and pillars were built in her honor.

An omen is a sign used by diviners to predict the future. Divination is an attempt to contact supernatural powers, spirits, and the dead to obtain knowledge of one's future or of future events. Some of the things used is liver, liquids, astrology and necromancy or contacting the dead.

The Lord repeatedly sent his own prophets to warn them about his anger against their idolatry to turn them back to his commands and statutes. But the people did not care for God's covenant laws in and just continued in their sins. Some of these pagan worship practices involved drunken orgies and sex, which they of course enjoyed.

You may be thinking that all of these things do not apply to you, “I'm not an idol-worshipper who bow down and kiss the Black Nazarene, or the Santo Niño, or statues of Mary.” But when you consult the horoscope, you are practicing astrology or divination. When you are fearful of black cats crossing your path, or fitting your wedding dress before the wedding day, Friday the 13th, or other superstitions, you are not trusting in the almighty, sovereign God who is in control of your life. When you let omens, superstitions and signs determine your life's decisions, you are not trusting God's promises in his Word.

The New Testament is full of warnings against idolatry, one of them in our reading of Colossians 3:1-10. In verses 5-9, Paul says that “sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness” are all forms of idolatry. Then he adds these: anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying. Why do we commit these sins? It all boils down to the First Commandment: we are all idolaters—self-worshippers. As a result, we do not obey the other nine Commandments, summarized in the Tenth Commandment which says that we always covet for ourselves things that we do not have because God does not give them to us.

Narcissists and Hedonists

Remember the story of Snow White? Her stepmother the Queen was beautiful, and she always looked at her magic mirror and asks, “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?” And the mirror would always answer that the Queen is the fairest of all. But one day, when Snow White grew up to be a beautiful young girl, the mirror replied to the Queen, “Snow White is the fairest of them all.” So the Queen was furious and sought to kill Snow White.
This fairy tale Queen was vain and self-centered. But in Greek mythology, there is a tale of one who was even more vain and self-centered. A beautiful hunter named Narcissus was so egocentric and vain that he spurned many women and even men who fell in love with him. They were all heartbroken, so one of the spurned suitors, Nemesis, lured him to a pool. Narcissus saw his reflection in the water and fell in love with it, not knowing that it was only his own reflection. He could not leave his own reflection because the more he stared, the more desperately he fell in love with himself. But the reflection obviously did not reciprocate his love, so Narcissus wasted away and died brokenhearted, and finally turned into the world’s first narcissus flower.

All of our sins can be traced back to **self-worship**. We are all narcissists. Men and women spend so much time, effort, and money to make their bodies beautiful so others would adore them. Then they ask their magic mirror, “Mirror, mirror on the wall: Who's got the greatest abs of them all?” We work so hard, neglecting even our families, so we could buy all the material things in this world. Our iPhones, iPads and other iToys have become iDols, where “i” means me, my and mine. It is idolatry as well when we work so hard that we neglect the Sabbath because we want to provide for our families. This is why Question 95 defines the act of idolatry not in terms of worshipping carved idols, but “to conceive or have something else in which to place our trust instead of, or besides, the one true God who has revealed Himself in His Word.”

John summarizes this materialistic idolatry as “the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions” (1 John 2:16). And if we put our trust in the things of the world instead of, or in addition to God, God is jealous. God demands our undivided worship, “Love God with all your heart, soul and strength.” Jesus was clear and right, “You cannot worship [both] God and money.” He might as well have said, “You cannot worship [both] God and self.”

Loving material possessions above all can also take the form of **loving pleasure** above all. Some ancient Greek philosophers taught that the highest and only intrinsic good is pleasure. Man's supreme and ultimate goal should be to maximize life's pleasures and minimize life's pains. This is called **hedonism**, from the Greek word for “delight” or “pleasure.”

Here, I digress a bit, but this digression is relevant to our theme. John Piper, in his book *Desiring God*, first proposed the name “Christian hedonism” for his motto, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” To say that “Christian hedonism” is a novel idea is an understatement, for it could lead the uninformed reader to think that this is the same as the famous Westminster Shorter Catechism statement, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” So it is to be received with some serious cautions. First, hedonism has origins in Greek philosophy that is egocentric; thus for Christians, it is a bad word.

Second, Piper's statement seems to elevate human pleasure above giving glory to God. What of the self-sacrificial and self-denying Christian life demanded by Jesus and the apostles? Piper even says, “The goal of Christian Hedonism is to find most pleasure in the one and only God and thus avoid the sin of covetousness, that is, idolatry.” There is a disturbing transaction here, which Piper summarizes, “We get the happiness in Him; He gets the honor from us.” But with this exchange, don't we use God as our tool to receive pleasure because our pleasure glorifies Him the most? Isn't the greatest commandment to love and glorify God, not to take pleasure in God? Isn't
it idolatry when Piper says, “Happiness in God is the end of all our seeking. Nothing beyond it can be sought as a higher goal”?

Third, Piper’s Christian hedonism implies that God needs man to be satisfied with himself for Him to be glorified, so it seems that God is not at all the self-sufficient God that the Old and New Testament writers have known.

**Into the Image of Our Idols and God into Our Image**

In the last part of verse 15, we read, “They went after false idols and became false.” In other versions, the word “false” is translated “worthless” or “vain.” So the Israelites became as worthless before God like their worthless idols, with lifeless mouths, eyes, ears, noses, hands and feet. And as the psalmist says, “Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them” (Psa 115:5-8). In the sight of God, idolaters are dead people who appear to be alive.

So **we become what we worship**: worthless, vain, false. We are conformed more and more into the images of our idols. Self-worship leads to lives that are worthless. How many lives have been destroyed because of money and possessions? How many families have been broken because of sexual sins, drunkenness, drug addiction, and even being a workaholic?

Self-worship leads to worthless churches. How many churches have been destroyed because of money, sexual immorality, divisions, and jealousy? These are all because of pride, envy and covetousness, which are all about worshipping ourselves and desiring pleasures above all. All of these are temporary and fleeting pleasures, and they are like idols that are also temporary and will one day disappear.

Not only do we become images of what we worship. The reverse is true: **we make God into our own image**. Instead of worshipping the God who revealed himself in his Word, we create our own special God tailor-made to our liking. We devise our own ways to worship God. (We will study this more next Lord’s Day.) We make God a God of our own desires, a God who is at our beck and call, a God who will do all our bidding—a homeboy, a dispenser of blessings and pleasures, of health and wealth. We turn God into a cut-and-paste deity: in the Bible, we accept whatever we like about him, and we reject whatever we don’t like. We have made the Bible like Facebook: God posts status reports and comments, and we “Like” whatever suits our pleasure, and we “Unlike,” “Hide” and “Delete” the rest.

**True Worshippers of the Only True God**

Because of the sins of the Israelites, foremost of which is idolatry, “The Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight” (verse 18). So after the Assyrians conquered Samaria, the Israelites ironically got what they always desired: a multitude of pagan idol-gods. The Assyrians exiled the Israelites into different parts of the empire, and in turn, people from Babylon, Syria, and other pagan lands were resettled in Samaria. These nations brought their idols, listed in verses 30-31, along with them.

The Israelites then intermarried with these peoples and so also worshipped their gods, and in verse 29, they were first called the derogatory name Samaritans. The Samaritans “feared the
Lord but also served their own gods” (verse 33). But to the writer of 2 Kings, in reality, they did not fear or worship the Lord, “They do not fear the Lord, and they do not follow... the commandment [of] the Lord” (verse 34). Their worship of the Lord was not genuine.

Over the centuries, perhaps through faithful Jews in the southern kingdom, the Samaritans got rid of their pantheon of idols. The Samaritan religion slowly turned back to a form of monotheism, and by the beginning of the New Testament, they had returned to the worship of one God. But their religion was still different from the Jews in Judah. They still worshipped in their own temple in Gerizim. They even believed that Joshua built an altar on Gerizim and not on Ebal. And they received only the Law of Moses, not the whole Old Testament.

This is the reason why Jews had a racist attitude towards Samaritans whom they considered as ethnically and religiously corrupt, and therefore “unclean.” To them, Samaritans are traitors to their Jewish heritage. So it was unthinkable for Jesus to speak to the Samaritan woman, and for a Samaritan traveler to be the good guy in Jesus' parable.

The Samaritan woman explained to Jesus that her people worshiped on their mountain, but Jesus countered by declaring that “the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father... when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21-24). The woman retorted that she was waiting for the coming Messiah who will tell all truth. And Jesus revealed to her that he is the “I Am,” that Messiah the Samaritans have been waiting for (verse 26), the very name that God used to reveal himself to Moses (Exod 3:14).

Since Jesus showed her that he is a prophet because he knew her whole life of sexual immorality, she started believing. She left her water jar in a hurry to go back to the town to tell the people that she has spoken to a man, “Can this be the Christ?” And the people immediately went out of the town to see for themselves if this man was truly the Messiah. After Jesus taught them for two days, many Samaritans believed his word, that he “is indeed the Savior of the world.”

Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman came true. The woman became the first true Samaritan worshipper, and the people in her town were the first of many true Samaritan worshippers. Before he ascended into heaven, Jesus commissioned his disciples, “And you will be my witness in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Philip and the other apostles fulfilled Jesus' commission when they went to Samaria to preach the gospel of Christ, and many believed. The hour had finally come when Samaritans and Jews will worship God not in man-made temples in Gerizim and Jerusalem, but in buildings and homes, farms and deserts, and in mountains and valleys in all the nations of the earth. Wherever there are true worshippers of the one true God, there is the temple of God.

True worship was only possible for the Samaritans and for all the nations if they worshipped God in spirit and in truth. These Samaritan believers turned away from their false idol-gods to worship the true God, Jesus the Son of God. They worshipped in truth when they rejected their false temple to worship with all true worshippers—the true temple—wherever they are found.
The Samaritan Who Redeemed Us from Idolatry

Jesus told the Pharisees of another Samaritan, this time not in real life, but in a parable. We know the story, but why did Jesus tell the parable? It was in response to a question by a lawyer, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus answered by asking him what the Law is all about, to which the lawyer answered, “Love God and love your neighbor.” So Jesus said to him, “Do this, and you will live. But the lawyer asked in return, “But who is my neighbor?” Then Jesus told him this parable.

A man was ambushed by robbers on a road and left for dead, and who would help him? Not a priest, not a Levite who passed him by, but a hated, unclean Samaritan. When he saw the fallen man, he bound his wounds, put him on his riding animal, and took him to an inn in the city. Then the Samaritan paid for all his lodging expenses.

Jesus’ last question to the lawyer, “Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” turns the lawyer’s question, “Who is my neighbor” upside down. Instead of focusing on who the lawyer’s neighbor is, Jesus points the finger on the lawyer, “Are you a neighbor to the man?” The man left for dead on the road to Jericho—the one who needs help—is not the neighbor. The Samaritan is the neighbor who helps the fallen man.

How did God accomplish the seemingly impossible salvation of helpless and hopeless sinners who are “fallen” on the road? He sent the pre-eminent Good Samaritan, Jesus Christ, to save his people from sin. To the Jews, he was a despised and rejected outcast (Isa 53:3; John 1:11), and they “had no dealings with him” (John 4:9). They actually slandered him by calling him an unclean Samaritan of dubious origin, and blasphemed him as being demon-possessed (John 8:48).

Redeeming his people from sin and his Father’s wrath cost Jesus everything—his honor, power and glory in heaven—he “made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant … humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:6-8). Everyone of us is the half-dead man who cannot do anything to save himself, “fallen” and not able to do anything good. The requirement of the Law, “Do this and you will live,” that sinners cannot possibly meet was fulfilled by Christ, by whose “obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). This is why Jesus repeatedly said that he came “to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34), and to fulfill the Law (Matt 5:17) all the way to his death.

He paid not only two denarii, but the ultimate price—his life-blood—“as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Finding his people afflicted by Satan and dead in sin, the Messiah would come “to bring good news to the afflicted … to bind up the brokenhearted” (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18). With his death on the cross, he paid for our “room and board” in this earthly dwelling place while we travel as pilgrims on the way to a permanent dwelling place that he has prepared for us in his Father’s house (John 14:2), where he will finally take us when he returns.

In his saving work on the cross, Jesus the Good Samaritan has redeemed us who are idolaters—false worshippers of false gods—to become true worshippers of the one true God. With his
salvation, he has enabled us to worship God in spirit and truth. And finally, he has made us heirs of eternal life.

Brothers and sisters, all of you who believe in Christ are in different stages of turning away from being idolaters. We are thankful that every Lord's Day, we hear the law—and gospel—preached. You hear God's law, and we know we come short of God's demands on his people to live holy and righteous lives. We then repent of our sins and ask our holy and merciful Father to forgive us, and he assures us that he forgives.

Ask the Spirit to give you strength in warding off all your self-centered idolatries. Ask him to give you the desire to worship God only, and not any other god of your own making—those desires and passions that rule us when you do not love God with all your heart, soul and strength. All of the outward forms of idolatry—sorcery, enchantments, invocation of saints or of other creatures, sexual immorality, impurity, anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk and lying—are evidences of a lack of trust in the one true God. And all of the inward forms of idolatry—passion, evil desire, and covetousness—are also evidences of the same lack of faith.

Instead, let us “rightly acknowledge the only true God, trust in Him alone, with all humility and patience expect all good from Him only, and love, fear, and honor Him with my whole heart.” How are you able to do this? “Set your minds on things that are above, [where Christ is], not on things that are on earth” (Col 3:1-2). Again, how are you able to fix your minds on Christ? By worshipping Christ alone in spirit and truth. With your whole heart. With the Word of God in which is all truth and knowledge of God. And with the Holy Spirit who brings you into true worship of God.