

Grinding the Golden Calf

Preaching God as great destroys the idol of seeing him as small.

"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs." (Jonah 2:8)

Preaching against idolatry is not what it used to be.

Idolatry isn't less of a problem today than it was in the Old Testament days of gilt godlets, when prophets could rail at the worshippers of Baal and Molech, because sin and sinners don't change that much. Of course, there are still idolaters today of the first magnitude—the modern pagans who really do worship gods who will swallow up their children. But we rarely preach to them. Most of the time we speak to people who believe in the true God and who confess salvation through Christ. We're hard pressed to consider them Idolaters with a capital *I*.

Nonetheless, when idolatry comes up in our texts, we carefully string yellow "crime scene" tape around the ordinary-looking idolatry that just seems to be "culture." We try to show TV and credit cards as today's household gods, and workaholism and consumerism as the gold-plated, wooden Baals that are no substitutes for 'the "Lord of the Angel Armies."

But it is a hard go. If the truth be told, most of our people cannot conceive that even their gross indulgences, their over-doings ("Too much TV, I know") are anything like biblical idolatry. After all, for them there is no worship, no rituals, and no depending on such things for rain or health, let alone heaven or salvation. "Call it a fault, if you must," they seem to smile back at us while we preach, "but idolatry? Puh-lease!" And, frankly, it is a tough sell for me, too.

Yet idolatry has not gone away, even among God's people. But our greatest threat may not be the little wooden gods of TV and leisure, work or money, but the Great God—the Lord God Almighty, El Shaddai—minimized. We certainly don't deny God's greatness. We would never do that, nor even believe it in our darkest heart. But we too often let our view of God grow small, like our snapshots of the Grand Canyon or a Mt. Rushmore paperweight.

"Well, that is certainly not the way *my* people hear about God," we protest. But the problem isn't that we fail to affirm the saving God, the powerful God, the holy God. Our sermons are most certainly *orthodox*; but often, they just aren't rich. God is captured, again and again, in oral nutshells. He is usually summed up. Many sermons take us to the woodshed, or to the Great Physician, or to Mt. Nebo where we can see God's promises stretching out before us, but seldom do sermons dwell well on the Lord himself.

Dulling Down God

The sorry fact is this: sometimes in our sermons we unwittingly dull our bright, vivid, vital God till the picture we preach looks like it came over a bad fax machine.

One way we dull the glory of God is when we surrender to our theological clichés in speaking of him. It is surely difficult to continually find fresh language to describe the Lord and his works. But when we resort to over-familiar language ("God is so holy," "Jesus is more powerful than anyone else," "God is... *God!*") our words become almost "white noise"; the listeners don't go home having really thought about the Lord. We do the same when we use predictable illustrations (the father sacrificing his son in the drawbridge, God in the courtroom) or when we use our favorite metaphors for God repeatedly, having never worked to mine fresh language.

Another way we deaden the living God is when we resort to scholastic, technical jargon to describe him. For example, if you were to preach on the great Christological hymn in Colossians 1:15-20, what would you do with the phrase, "He is the image of the invisible God"? Of course, it would help our people to know that the word *image* is the Greek *icon*, and we may want to mention that God is invisible because he is spirit. To explain and illustrate these things may have people nodding in understanding, but shouldn't there be more? Shouldn't they come to the end of such a sermon wanting to sing and eager to pray? To reduce our message to term-paper language won't make that happen. At the end, they'll be thinking only of lunch.

A third way we fog God's glory is by not showing how he stands behind texts that are not explicitly about him. When I see a play I like I'm invariably curious about the playwright. What of her is written into this story? What prompted him to give such a powerful speech to that character? Many Bible passages don't have explicit statements about the attributes of God, but there is no text that doesn't reveal something wondrous of God. We don't do the text justice if we don't help people see God standing in the wings.

Polishing the Spotlight's Lens

Preaching, of course, is supposed to bring glory to God. I think of myself preaching as being like a spotlight operator. Our spotlight is the Bible. We need to point the spotlight accurately lest we become like one of those amateurs who jerk their light beam all over the stage till they find the star. We need to know when the light should be wide to give room for God to move and when it is focused tightly so that we hear every syllable God says. And we'd better be sure the lens is polished so the light shines as brightly as possible. Here are two ways to polish and point the lens:

1. *Most important of all is to scour the text for all it can tell us about the Lord.*

I read a mystery recently about a forensic scientist who solved a disappearance by meticulous examination of fibers, soil, and chemicals. He regarded everything as a clue, and he made lists of every clue, reading the lists over and over till they revealed their secrets. We need to have that diligence in searching for evidences of God in a text. Even texts that are explicit in their statements about God need to be scrutinized lest we miss the most important details in the brightness of the obvious.

Like a forensic scientist, when we look at the evidence of a text we want not only to gather every detail we can find, but we also want to know what they *mean*. What do

these details collectively tell me about our God? When I preached on the Old Testament tabernacle, I spent a lot of time thinking about what a table with bread in the Holy Place told me about God. When I studied Colossians 1:16, I thought hard about what Paul meant by saying, "In him all things were created." And when I was working on yet another Christmas sermon from Luke 2, it took me a long time to sort out how the manger was a sign. All these passages told me things about the Lord that I would have missed had I not gotten out my official Sherlock Holmes magnifying glass and crawled around on the floor of the text looking for clues.

2. *Pray for your own poetry of praise.*

As mentioned before, preachers must not always describe God in "cool" terms (academic, factual, unemotional). Our talk of God must be rich in fact, but also warm and beautiful in language.

As I've struggled to craft a sermon point that exalts Christ, I've often wished I had worked to be a poet. I have favorite places I look for quotes from others who have a flair for the well-turned phrase—the sermons of Spurgeon or Maclaren, writings by the likes of Eugene Peterson or Frederick Buechner. When Vance Havner wanted to communicate that Christ is pre-eminent, he found a fresh way to say it: "Jesus is all we have; he is all we need and all we want. We are shipwrecked on God and stranded on omnipotence." I was glad I could use his words.

But I have also learned that God can give me a kind of poetry in my own tongue. I remember years ago searching in vain for just the right quote when I felt as though God said, "Write your own quote! I'll help you. You can say things beautifully, too." It is hard artistic work to say something about the Lord in well-crafted words. Not too flowery or ostentatious, but our own soul's poetry. We find our poet-voice when we pray a text into our heart; when we take that one fresh clue we have found about the Father, the Savior, or the Spirit, and wonder over it in prayer, like a Boy Scout blowing on a spark till a flame flares up.

"Oh God," I prayed, "what does it mean to know a Savior who was born in a manger? Why was the manger a sign?" Gradually, as I pondered that in prayer, I came to these words for my sermon: "Most saviors—rescuers—save by might, or by trickery. But God's Savior would not save that way. He would save from a kind of weakness, by a kind of surrender. Here was born a Savior who would take on the very nature of a servant, who would touch our outcasts and dine with our failures, who would wash our feet and submit to our unjust systems, who would surrender to our most heinous and humiliating death. And he would save us that way! The manger was the first sign of a Savior who would be born among animals and die between thieves" (a phrase I borrowed from Darrell Bock).

It wasn't great poetry, but it was the poetry of my soul, and I think it was moving to the people who heard me, because God had breathed it into flame during my prayers.

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When Moses discovered the Israelites had cast the golden calf, he ground it to powder and made them drink it like an anti-idolatry potion. But he also delivered to them the plans for the Tabernacle that they might see what a poor substitute that bull-god was for Jehovah, who wanted to make his home among them. Sometimes our preaching takes us to texts that grind up the golden calf again and pour the metallic-tasting stuff down the throats of God's people so they won't chase after such imposters. But more often the Scriptures will combat the lurking idolatry of the Lord's people by setting before them the beauty and grace, the transcendence and immanence, of our Triune God.

Let us preach in words warm with the Spirit's breath, brought recently to life in our prayers. We cannot leave the "beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life" to the songwriters and worship leaders. Preachers must be lyricists of the Lord, too. Such sermons are the most practical and useful of all. For people who have been brought near enough to the holiness of God to yank off their shoes and close enough to the cross to receive back their ring and robe and sandals are Christians who are alive.

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