

biblestudy: november 2019

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series

November 3, 2019 Text: Deuteronomy 5:6-10, 6:4-9 “God First”

Read these verses again. Does God really punish children for the evil done by their parents? (Look particularly at Deuteronomy 5:9.) It doesn’t seem fair!

The word translated “punish” is *pâqad*. One dictionary I consulted gives twenty-three different ways the term can be understood! One choice would be “to oversee” (as in supervise). That feels better. How about “to have custody of the children”? Any way you slice it, the text reminds us that what a parent does affects the life of a child.

It is not too much of a stretch to think of the way that my generation has abused the environment is going to make a difference in the world in which my grandsons live. Our error punishes them. Is it any wonder that nations continue to go to war? That is what we have learned from the way our ancestors resolved differences. That evil gets passed on. When we measure value by money, why should we be surprised when that becomes a culture’s dominant value? For example, read Deuteronomy 5:9 and each time the word “them” appears (referring to idols), substitute the word “money.” God is jealous of money!

But there is another side to these verses. When we obey God’s commandments (Deuteronomy 5:10), love and joy and hope and peace is our inheritance for our children and their children and their children and their children---a thousand generations. There is no off season for loving and serving God. Deuteronomy 6:7 says “when you are at

home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” That about covers all the options!

Who/what are other gods that we might be tempted to put before the true God (Deuteronomy 5:7)? Power. Prestige. Lust. Money. Untruth. Jealousy. (Of course, I am talking about you and not about me. Hmmm.)

Last March, one of my grandsons had a birthday. I sent him a couple of e-mails and then texted him: “Do you have a suggestion for a birthday gift?” He answered, “Not really.” So when push came to shove, I decided to figure out how many days he had lived and then send him my two cents worth: two cents for every day he had been alive. (I was pleased with how clever I was.) But now, after being challenged by this week’s study texts, I believe the best gift I could ever give him would be to love God with all my heart, my soul, my might. Happy birthday, Liam.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Nell Scovell (*Just the Funny Parts*, Dey Street of William Morrow) has written: “...while work expands to fill the time, time expands to fill a mission.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Clear my heart so I can serve You...”

November 10, 2019 Text: Exodus 32:1-8 “Worshiping the Gold Bull Calf”

Yesterday, I saw a news video on television about how some people had discovered that their private rooms in rented homes were outfitted with hidden cameras. Obviously, these folks were upset that what they thought they were doing in private was actually being shown to anyone who had access to that camera.

What would you do if you thought no one was looking? That is sort of what happened to the Israelites. Moses has been their leader and, more or less, their signal caller. Now, he is off on a mountain somewhere, so the traveling Hebrews are left to their own devices (Exodus 32:1). It’s like what might happen in a classroom when the teacher has to step outside for a moment.

That’s when they start building the golden calf. It was party time! “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.” This calf won’t be as demanding of us as good ol’ Moses and the God he serves. The golden calf seemed like a better deal and there is no hidden camera, so Moses doesn’t have any notion as to what is going on.

But, oops! The Israelites made a slight boo boo. Moses might not be able to see what they are doing, but God can! And God sends Moses to straighten out this mess. I don’t know about you, but I am a bit wary of anyone who tells me that God has given them a message to give to me. But God does send prophets. God does send messengers. God does send envoys.

Our study text does not go into what happened next. (If you are reading the daily assignments in this series, you will have read about Moses’ pleading with God to take it easy on Israel; you have seen the unusual words—Exodus 32:14—“And the Lord changed his mind.”)

This tragic incident is not the end of the story. We know that the escaping slaves made it to the Promised Land. We know that God is a God of new beginnings. What a blessing! The God who watches us when no one else does is the One who holds us accountable (Exodus 32:34) and is the One who still gives God’s people a land filled with milk and honey (Exodus 33:1).

Can I hear that as a challenge to live knowing that God is watching? Can I hear that as the good news that God still goes with me to tomorrow?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *Future Faith* (Fortress Press), Wesley Granberg-Michaelson has written: “Prophets call the people of God back to their true identity, forsaking other corporate loyalties.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Grant a new beginning, Lord...”

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November 17, 2019 Text: Habakkuk 2:18-20, Jeremiah 51:15-19 “The Real God”

Had you rather be called “stupid” (New Revised Standard Version), “senseless” (New International Version), “brutish” (King James Version), “foolish” (Common English Bible), “ignorant” (New English Bible), or “stupid beast” (The Living Bible)? None of that is going to look very good on your resume!

Those strong words show up in Jeremiah 51:17. The prophet must have thought this was important because he uses almost the exact same words in Jeremiah 10:12-16. Students of the Bible who pore over this text do not agree. Is the prophet speaking about the evil Babylonians or about all of humankind or about false idols? No matter which choice is made, it is clear that it is in contrast to the truth of God, in contrast to power of God, in contrast to the reality of God.

Habakkuk 2:18-20 stirs in the same pot. Idols cannot respond to our pleas; idols cannot teach true values; idols are not actually alive. But the Lord can indeed respond to our pleas; the Lord can indeed instruct us; the Lord is indeed a living presence.

These days few of us have made idols of statues of wood or metal, but that does not excuse us from the challenge of these verses. Our idols may be made of the limits of our plastic credit cards. Our idols may be made of the number of friends on our social media accounts.

November 24, 2019 Text: Acts 17: 16, 22-34 “Paul in Athens”

Acts 17:16: All of this episode happened while Paul was waiting for Timothy and Silas to catch up with him (Acts 17:15). Waiting. I think I might well have thought of this as a good time to take a break from all this evangelism work. “Once the rest of the team gets here, we’ll get started.” But, Paul uses this unscheduled time as a chance to witness. I am left to wonder: Do I want to wait until everything is lined up “just right” before I do anything? That kind of waiting usually turns into nothing ever happening.

Acts 17:22: Paul has been all around Athens (a city of about 5,000) and had seen a lot to get him terribly upset about the idols that were on display all over the place. But, he knew that Athenians were always curious about anything new (Acts 17:21). Maybe it was sort of like our culture’s fascination with every development in cell phone technology; we want the latest. So, Paul goes to this outcropping of rock (Areopagus) on the edge of town where folks gathered to debate and discuss. I am left to wonder: Do I insist on doing evangelism on my own turf (the church) instead of going out into the city?

Acts 17:22: The apostle begins by finding something he has in common with the people of Athens: They are very religious. I think I might have been tempted to say, “You ignorant bunch of sinners and babbling idiots, let me straighten you out.” In this scene, Paul is not pushing a hostile confrontation. Paul assumes the best about these people. Alas, when I think of those with whom I vigorously

Our idols may be hidden in secret Internet accounts. Our idols may actually be a false humility that ignores the gifts God has planted for us to use.

There is an alternative to these false idols. God is for real (Jeremiah 51:19). God has legitimate and actual power (Jeremiah 51:15-16). God has created a community (Jeremiah 51:19). God is waiting to hear from us (Habakkuk 2:20).

When I try to slip away from God, I might choose an idol different from the one you would choose. Others might even admire my idol. That makes it tough to see the falseness of my idol. Sometimes, we might need to help each other see the false idols to which we are attracted.

What Someone Else Has Said:

William B. Lawrence (*Methodism in Recovery*, Abingdon) quotes Ernest Campbell: “We can all confess to a tendency to retreat from the mysterious to the manageable.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of Truth, come and sweep away those false places in my life...”

disagree, I tend to think the worst of them and attribute bad motives to all of their decisions.

Acts 17:24-31: These verses are the heart of what Paul proclaimed that day. It is a simple and straight-forward statement of what Paul believed and taught. He does not use words like “eschatological” or “kenosis” or “imago dei,” although he speaks of each of these. Do I hesitate to speak about the gospel for fear that I won’t use all the right words?

Acts 17:32-33: Paul does not bat 1000. Some scoffed. Some asked for more. Some became believers. Do I consider my efforts a waste of time or a failure if everyone with whom I come in contact does not immediately join the nearest United Methodist church? Maybe faithfulness in proclamation is what God expects.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Richard Rohr, (*The Universal Christ*, Convergent) wrote: “...the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Use me where I am, Lord...”

