

## Baal Worship

Romans 11:4

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Did you like poetry at school? In Ireland the guys hated it and the girls liked it. It is only gradually, I think, as we mature, that we begin to see that poets --or at least real poets -- are people with heightened sensitivities and heightened perception, who are able to see into the heart of our present experience and are able to describe things that we all feel but could never put into words. Two hundred years ago, a poet named Wordsworth described our present experience in these words: "The world is too much with us. Late and soon, getting and spending we lay waste our powers. Little we see in nature that is ours. We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon. This sea that bares her bosom to the moon, these winds that will be howling at all hours and are upgathered now like sleeping flowers. For this, for everything we are out of tune: it moves us not."

Those of us who have to earn a living feel like saying, "Well, he sounds like a flower child or an adolescent who doesn't want to work." Yet even we have had moments in the wee hours when we were staring at that list of figures for an audit or at that list of new financial obligations, when we felt, yes, "late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." I don't think we've felt that we have sold our souls to the devil for some temporary gain, but we do feel at times that we have given away our hearts "a sordid boon". There are moments when we're awakened inside to realize that, yes, there are some insights, there are some sensitivities, there are some perceptions, that don't seem as real now as they did years ago. It does seem that I am losing touch with the ability to sense and touch some things that I used to be able to sense and touch. But of course, we comfort ourselves and say, "Well, somebody has to earn the money. Somebody has to pay the price for shouldering the responsibilities of this world."

Yet, we human beings keep on having these concerns about the amount of time we spend getting material things gathered around us. Two hundred years later, just twenty years ago, a poet called Auden said, "In headaches and in worry, vaguely life leaks away; And time will have his fancy, tomorrow or today." There are many of us here who thought that the tightness of money in our lives and the uptightness that we felt about our circumstances, would only last as long as it took to get ourselves on our feet. Yet, we would have to admit that "in headaches and in worry", vaguely life seems to be still leaking away. We have often been tense and strained when we thought of how we were going to meet the payment on the car this month, or on the coat or the house. We have been horrified when we have looked and seen how much of our life has gone, with us absolutely preoccupied with getting the things around us that we felt we needed to make life livable.

Now, don't get up and walk out mentally when I say this, because I will try to explain in a way with which you will agree. That's Baal worship. Don't sit there and think, "Oh, no you can't mean us!" I mean it, because many of us are suffering the anxieties and the worries of Baal worshipers when we live like that. It is all the misery and agony of those dear souls that worship Baal.

What I'd love us to do as friends this morning, is to help each other to see in what ways we are involved in that, and most of all, in what ways we can be free from it. So, let's look at the verse where God brings it before our minds this morning. Romans 11:4. Elijah had just cried that cry of self pity, "They have killed thy prophets, they have demolished thy altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life," and then in verse 4 is God's reply to him: "I have kept for myself 7,000 men who

have not bowed the knee to Baal."

I always thought that if you talked about Baal worship, you meant that the pagans, and the Jews who were influenced by them, had some kind of little stone idol in their living rooms. Something like a fat, little, grinning Buddha-type creature, and that they bowed to him in the morning and bowed to him at night. Now, I will admit I was a little uneasy with that idea. I wondered, how could men like me be more stupid than me and so much more naive than me as to think that stone idol was really God? How could they be so stupid just because they lived a few thousand years earlier? So I did wonder if that was really what idol worship was.

Loved ones, that isn't Baal worship at all. The Hebrew word "ba'al", which is our word "Baal", is a verb and means in Hebrew, "to be master of " or "to own." And the truth is, the old pagans had no more need of stone idols than you or I, but, they had the same tremendous need for security as you and I. Once they turned their backs on the Creator's plan for their security, they had to find security from their own sources -- as you and I -- by trying to gather as many possessions and things as they could to make themselves secure. The whole spirit of Baal, or ownership, injected iron into their souls, just the same way as that spirit of Baal or ownership, injects iron into our souls when we depend on our jobs or our positions for our security and we see either of them threatened. Baal worship is simply dependence on possessions for our security. It is security through ownership of things rather than security through trusting a friend. Any stone idols they had were only there to express the actual philosophy by which they lived and the thing that made them tick. That is what determines what a person worships. It is what makes you tick. It's not the church you go to, it's how you live day by day.

Now, what was God's plan for our security? Jesus said, "My Father, your Maker, has put each one of you here to fulfill a certain task in bringing His world under His will. During your seventy years you are going to have many different jobs. But my Father has set each one of them so that you will be able to cooperate with Him in doing what He wants to do with this world of His. And so, all you have to do is concentrate on your Maker, get to know Him, get to know how He wants you to treat His world day by day, and then my Father, your Maker, will take care of you. You don't need to be anxious about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about clothing your body, what you will wear. Your heavenly Father knows you have need of all these things. Look at the lilies of the field, they don't toil, they don't spin, and yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of them. Look at the birds of the air, they don't sow or reap or gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of much more value than they? So don't be anxious saying, 'What are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to put on' as people who don't trust my Father seek. But your Father knows that you need these things. So seek first His direction for your life and His rule in your life and all these things will be yours as well."

That's God's plan. You can see the vast difference in having a security that depends on a dear Friend that you can trust to provide all your needs, as opposed to a security that is based on trying to get enough things for your self, so that you will be able to see your way through to the end of life. There's a vast difference! It's like me saying to you this morning, "I have 500 thousand billion dollars in the bank. If there is anything that you need, if you ever need a bill paid or an operation, or if you really need a new car, or you are in some kind of difficulty -- all you have to do is do your job with all your heart and enjoy doing it. When you have a need just come to me and ask me and I will meet that need for you." Can you imagine the relaxation that would come deep down inside you at this very moment?

Think of the relaxation about what you are going to do about that pipe on your car that is dragging on the ground. Think of the relaxation you would have about clothes or vacations. Then think what it would be like if I said also, "I'll answer these in all kinds of ways. Sometimes I'll send you a check. At times I will pay the bill. I may deal with the problem without you even knowing about it. At times, I'll provide a new job for you. I'll always meet the need, whatever it is. Don't worry. Just trust me to do it." And just think of the peace you would have if I also said, "If you have any physical sickness, I can heal that and make you well. I won't let you go through death until you are ready for it and able to bear it and until I have a beautiful spot for you in the world that is going to live forever." You know the peace that would come into your heart.

Now, loved ones, that is God's plan for our security. That we would trust a Person -- our dear Father -- to meet all our needs, instead of trusting our ownership of enough stocks and shares, of enough possessions and enough property. Now, in what way do we not do that?

Well, first of all, many of us are really pagans. We have rejected God's idea for our lives, we show no interest in what His plans are for us. We don't spend a minute of any day asking Him what He wants us to do. We have actually rejected His rule over us. So we have no confidence in expecting that He will fulfill His promises to us because His promises are conditional upon us obeying Him. Many of us are just rank pagans! We don't let God govern our personal relationships with other people; we don't let Him govern what we are going to do on vacation; we don't let Him govern our marriage plans; we don't let Him govern what we do with our businesses. The result is we actually quake inside when it comes to God's promises, because we have no ground for expecting Him to fulfill those promises, simply because they are conditional upon obedience.

Others of us here this morning say, "Well, I'm not a pagan. I'm not a rebel. I believe in God. I believe Jesus died for me. I believe many of the things that you have talked about in God's plan to meet my needs for security. I believe those things, but somehow in my life I still experience the anxiety that Auden talked about: "In headaches and in worry vaguely life leaks away." That's what my life is like. I believe God is a good God. I believe He is kind. I believe He is taking care of me, but I must admit that I do get worried and I do get anxious about the bills that have to be paid. I do get concerned about my future. I do seem to have many of the symptoms of the people that you describe as Baal worshippers." Why? Syncretism! It means worshipping or trying to worship two gods at once. That's why God said what He did to Elijah. "Look, I have seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal. Israel as a whole sees me as Jehovah God, but they also try to worship Baal. And of course I am a jealous God. I know that you cannot get anything unless you trust me completely apart from everything else. You can't worship two gods at once -- and they aren't. They are worshipping the god that they trust day by day."

Loved ones, that is the situation with many of us. We say we believe in God; in our heads we give mental assent to Him. We give mental assent to the idea that Jesus died for us, but day by day we don't trust our dear Father who is our truest Friend and who will never let us down. We live day by day trusting our possessions and our ability to gather and collect enough of them to see us through to the end of this life.

I do think I could help some of us here, including myself, to see the way we deceive ourselves into this. Some of us say, "I believe Jesus' words and promises about his Father, our Maker, meeting the needs of all of us who trust Him. I believe that is true for missionaries, for those who live by faith, for those who are doing the Lord's work. I believe that Jesus was speaking those words "Look at the lilies of the field, look at the birds of the air" to missionaries who give up their ordinary

jobs, or those people who are in full-time Christian service, or those people who live by faith, who don't work."

But for those of us who work, I think this is the way our thoughts go: We think we are second class citizens. Actually, we think the ideal thing would be just to trust the Lord and not to work at all. When you work, it means you are not trusting the Lord. We can give money to missionaries and all that kind of thing, but we are just ordinary people. Missionaries get what they need by trusting God to meet all their needs, but we work; that's the way we meet our needs.

In other words, we have an absolutely wrong and demonic view of work. We think that work is given to us to help us meet our needs. We think work takes the place of God. The result is that many of us feel guilty about it. We see work as an alternative to God. You either worship God or you worship work. Work is a necessary evil, a punishment for our sins, so the best way is not to work too enthusiastically. We could have been a saint or a missionary or somebody in full time Christian service, but we are just a worker so the best way is not to get wrapped up in it. We work half-heartedly.

We insult our dear God who had not that plan for work at all. It was not His method for meeting our needs. His love is His method for meeting our needs. Work is simply what He has given us to do to bring His world more under His will. He wants us to work enthusiastically, doing our very best at our job, working as hard as we can, as well as we can, because it is an act of worship of Him and of His creation. But there are many of us who don't see it that way. We think the work is our god who supplies our needs and don't really trust God to supply our needs, and yet we are unhappy about the god of work that we worship. On the other side some of us say, "Work is my method of getting security. I don't have God to depend on the way those missionaries and people who live by faith have, so I am going to work like a Trojan." And we give ourselves wholly to the work and we make it our god.

Loved ones, I think that is one way in which many of us work ourselves into a position where we are living by the worship of Baal. And we don't see that God is saying to us, "Do the work that I have given you. Do it well. Do it with all your heart. Do it in the best way possible to make my world as near as possible to what I had originally planned. As you do that, I will supply your needs. Some of it will come through your salary, some of it will come through the way I will maneuver the bills and the accounts so that you will just have enough for the month. Some of it will come through the unexpected things that I will give you as you draw toward retirement. But you work hard, and I will supply your needs." Senator Sam Ervin, who chaired the Watergate committee, said, "I haven't spent fifteen minutes in my whole life working out how to make money." Now he worked hard all his life but he said that. With many of us our job is to make money for other people, and we ought to do that job well; but we ought not to do it with this terrible fear that it is our method of establishing our security. It's utterly irrelevant. We work hard and God is the one who will supply our needs.

I think there is one other way that some of us get ourselves into Baal worship. We say, "I believe Jesus' words about God fulfilling our needs and meeting our material needs if we trust Him. I believe that is true for the weak and incompetent people of this world. I believe there are some dear souls that if God didn't look after them, they would die. But for those of us who are competent and capable -- well, we ought to lighten God's load for Him as much as we can!" We are like the old man carrying his load of wood along a country road. A young man driving a donkey-cart catches up with him and the young driver offers the old man a ride. The old man climbs on to the cart beside the driver but keeps his huge load of wood on his shoulders. The young man looks at him in surprise

and says; "Put your load of wood on the cart between us here and relax!" The old man replies: "Oh, it's kind enough of you to have your donkey carry me -- I wouldn't ask you to carry my wood as well!"

Many of us have that attitude. We will let God carry a little bit of the burden, but not us as well. But, loved ones, God does carry us as well! We don't realize that, and that's why some of us who are competent and capable get worried about the dent on the car. We think it is really ours -- we are responsible for it, we have bought it with our hard-earned money, and we are competent and capable to earn more money to get it repaired. Loved ones, it's foolish. God gives us those gifts independent of our ability, irrespective of whether we are competent and capable or not, as free gifts. They are His, and He has only lent them to us for awhile. All of us need to see that work is separate from this whole business of having our needs met. Our work is something we do for God, that He has given us to do to bring His world into greater order. We should do it well for that reason. Then we need to see that God will fulfill His promises to every one of us, and that means every one of us -- those of us who are able and those of us who are unable.

Would you start today to trust Him? Would you leap into faith? Would you say, "Yes, I can change my attitude today. I can stop depending on this strength of mine or this mental ability or this particular skill that I have, that has been given to me by God anyway and can be taken away by Him tomorrow. I am going to stop depending on these things and start enjoying them instead."

What a relief it would be to be a good dentist, a good artist, a good insurance agent, just because that would please our Father in Heaven. And we could then trust Him to give -- at times through our salary, at times, through the rearranging of circumstances -- all we need in this present life. Would you think about it, loved ones? Would you decide if you have been involved in Baal worship? If you are in any doubt about it, just remember Auden's poem, "In headaches and in worry, vaguely life leaks away." That's the mark of Baal worship. The mark of the one who trusts our dear Father is joy and peace. I pray that God will deliver many of us; today from Baal worship.