

“When Too Much Is Too Little”
Acts 14:1-2, 8-18
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The great English author C.S. Lewis once wrote,

It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Imagine! Too easily pleased! Our desires too weak! Lewis’s statement flies in the face of all we have heard for as long as anyone can remember that we are never pleased and our desires too strong!

And yet, it’s true! We are too easily pleased by what amounts in life as no more than trifles while our appetite for God and spiritual things grows feebler. Lewis might say we piffle our lives away on trivialities.

If we don’t believe this, ask Paul and Barnabas in today’s text. Here are these 2 missionaries of God, healing a cripple, when what happens? The citizens of Lystra take them to be gods! They figure, “Hey! If these guys can heal a cripple, they must be divine!” And so the Lycaonians name them after 2 Greek gods: Zeus and Hermes. It’s a page right out of “Return of the Jedi” from “Star Wars,” when the cuddly Ewoks start to worship the droid C3PO as a god!

Of course, Paul and Barnabas are scandalized by all this fuss, especially when the Lycaonians are about to offer them sacrifice. Mortified, they rend their garments as a sign of penitence. By the end, they only barely stop them. But the damage is done. The Lycaonians have misplaced their worship upon Paul and Barnabas and not the God the two proclaim.

We hear a lot these days about atheism and agnosticism, the ideas there is no god or a god you can't be sure of. But this isn't the Lycaonians' problem. It's polytheism: their readiness to worship many gods!

Polytheism is still rampant today. If height suggests worship, look at the tallest buildings in our nation. A hundred years ago they were the churches with lofty steeples. Today they're commercial skyscrapers: banks and insurance companies. These are today's altars. And the things we sacrifice for also suggest today's gods: Eternal Youth and Success, Security and Fortune, Pleasure and Good Health. People's veneration of these is what Lewis means when he says "Our desires are too weak, our spiritual horizons too limited."

Jesus tells the rich man to go and sell all he has. Jesus doesn't say this because he's against worldly possessions, but because he knows "*life is more than mere possessions.*" Jesus says, "*Don't worry about how long you shall live,*" NOT because he was against how long we live, but HOW WE LIVE! He's concerned by people's consistent practice of reducing their

lives to trivial pursuits which have nothing to do with either life's meaning or its richest rewards: like love and compassion for others! One person put it succinctly: "If life's a banquet why are so many people starving?"

These days we also hear a lot about stress. Of us Boomers it's said that no group in American history has been so well off materially and yet so unhappy. A great deal of unhappiness today is the result of the stress caused by keeping up with **so many gods!** We live in a pressure cooker of having to ensure we have enough of everything and that everything in our lives is just right: from our dream vacation to our dream retirement. Rabbi Kushner captures the essence of how many of us feel in the title of his book *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough.* Could it be we serve too many gods?

Trouble today is: people are no better at discerning the one true God than the pagans of Lystra. People do not understand how very different Jesus' God is from all the other gods. They don't recognize, for instance, how the other gods always turn their subjects into slaves. What happens when we serve the god Money? We end up having to make more and more money to be content! So it is with all other quote-unquote "gods." They're insatiable. They induce addictions. They crush us. They never set us free. They only enslave us and keep us their slaves.

Yet the God of Jesus Christ doesn't make us slaves, but friends. Our God sets us free to enjoy each day: like the beauty of a flower, the wonder

of a child's laughter, the loveliness of a long-term friendship that grows more amazing with age. Jesus says, "*You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.*" The truth is: no other god besides our God can set us free! Do we know this?

Well we know what life serving other gods looks like. As theologian Dorothy Soelle writes,

What comes between Christ and the middle classes of the first world isn't poverty but spiritual emptiness. The meaninglessness of life perceived by many sensitive individuals ever since the beginning of industrial development has now become a widespread experience among the mass of people in the first world; nothing delights them, nothing moves them deeply; their relationships are superficial and interchangeable, their hopes and dreams go no further than their next holiday trip. For the majority, work is unsatisfying, pointless, boring. Life is more like a long death lingering over many years.

Harold Kushner, in the little book I just mentioned, tells of the amazing difference between the way different people experienced imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps. He says that those who did best weren't those who came from wealth or social position or prestigious jobs. Rather they were the ones whose sense of self grew out of their religious faith or their own sense of self-worth.

"*Choose now whom you will serve,*" Deuteronomy exclaims. And so we do. But is it Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone of the church or is it someone or something else?

Well, one point not to be missed in today's text is the *enthusiasm* with which the Lycaonians were ready to sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul. Fact is: people ALWAYS sacrifice for what they worship. Look in any checkbook and we'll see what gods we serve!

But we must be prepared to understand the price we pay for such misplaced devotion. Andrew Carnegie, the great industrialist, born in poverty only to grow into one of the wealthiest people of his times, spoke in later life, about the happiness of his youth. He said he would not exchange the sacred memories of his humble home with the richest millionaire's son who ever breathed. Said Carnegie,

Some men think that poverty is a dreadful burden, and that wealth leads to happiness. What do they know about it? They know only one side; they imagine the other. I have lived both, and I know there is little in wealth that can add to human happiness, beyond the small comforts of life. Millionaires who laugh are rare. My experience is that wealth is apt to take the smiles away.

Carnegie had learned, probably the hard way, when too much is too little.

C.S. Lewis had it right: Our desires are too weak. Our passions are too shallow. Our worship is too widespread. Maybe this is why God made the first commandment to have no other gods before him. It wasn't because God loved handing out commandments. It was because God knows there is no surer way to true joy, freedom, and bliss than to put first things first and worship no other gods but Him!