

Loyalties



Sabbath Afternoon

MEMORY TEXT: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matthew 22:37, 38).

IHAD TRAVELED eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square . . . with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream—grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City.”—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: New American Library, 1957), pp. 89, 90.

Life, however, does not have to be so futile. God offers us a much better end than what Kerouac depicted here, one that can make this existence full of meaning and purpose now. However, the Lord does not force that end upon us. We have to choose, a choice that is made manifest every day of our lives by the little things we do, things that reveal where our loyalties really lie.

That is what we will look at this week: loyalties. Are we loyal to our God or to something else? This is a crucial question, for whatever our other loyalties are, in whatever form they manifest themselves, one thing’s for sure: In the end, they can lead only to one of those awful “cemetery cities,” wherever they happen to be.

THE WEEK AT A GLANCE: What is the most important commandment, and why? Why can’t we serve two masters? Why is loyalty to God so crucial? What are some of the other things that vie for our loyalty?

*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 24.

THE PRINCIPLE OF LOYALTY (Exod. 20:2, 3).

Notice, the first commandment listed in the law isn’t the Sabbath commandment; it isn’t the commandment against adultery, murder, or covetousness. Instead, the Lord commands them to have no other gods before Him.

What is He saying here? Is He saying, “Well, there are other gods out there, but I want you to give Me your best allegiance”? Some scholars argue that, in a sense, this is what the Lord is saying here but only because the Israelites were so steeped in idolatry and false thinking (see, for instance, Exod. 32:4) that God needed to phrase it in ways they would understand.

On the other hand, the real point of the text seems to be not that other gods (as in supernatural deities) exist but that Israel should have nothing that stands between them and the Lord. He alone must come first.

It’s no different today, is it? As long as any other “god” claims the first affection of our hearts, as long as we endeavor to divide our allegiance between the God of heaven and the gods of this earth, as long as any darling idol, pet vice, or cherished sin is permitted to share the throne of our hearts with the only true God, then we will have some other “god” before the Lord. And if we are violating that commandment, there’s no question—violation of many of the others, to one degree or another, will follow.

Why is obedience to the first commandment so important? Why can we have no other “god” before the Lord?

Read carefully Matthew 6:24, where Jesus, more or less, reiterates the message of the first commandment. Though the wording is different, Jesus here is clearly showing why obedience to the first commandment is so crucial. He doesn’t leave any middle ground. There’s not much room (in fact, there’s none) for compromise, for some sort of half-allegiance. Jesus takes the position that our loyalty to the Lord either will be all or nothing at all. That’s pretty stern.

Why is it impossible to serve two masters? What examples can you find from the Bible or from personal experience that reveal the truth of this important principle? Have you ever tried to divide your loyalties between the Lord and something else? If so, what happened?

WHOLEHEARTED ALLEGIANCE.

“Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matt. 22:35-38).

How fascinating: Jesus is asked to name “the great commandment in the law,” and He answers by giving them not even one of the specific commandments in the Decalogue. Read Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5; the words that Jesus spoke in Matthew 22 are not listed in the Ten Commandments. And yet, He specifically calls those words the “first and great commandment.”

To understand better the point Jesus is making, we need to look at the text, in context, He quoted to the lawyer. This is found in Deuteronomy 6:5. Read the first ten verses of Deuteronomy 6. What is the Lord saying to Israel there, and why would Jesus quote it as the “first and great commandment”? Also, in what ways does that verse reiterate the idea found in the first commandment in the Decalogue?

We are to love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. This does not leave room for much else.

But that’s the point. As the first commandment says, as Jesus said in Matthew 6, as is expressed in Deuteronomy 6, and as Jesus repeats in Matthew 22, love for God has to dominate every aspect of our lives. If not, if there is something that we will not surrender to Him, then that thing that we are holding onto becomes an idol, another god; even worse, it can become the means through which Satan gets control of us. We can not give the enemy any place, anywhere. That’s why our loyalty to the Lord has to be complete, undivided, and total. When we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind, we have given all of ourselves to Him. Then He can work in us and make us into the people He wants us to be.

If love for God is the first and great commandment, how would you answer someone who asks, “Please explain to me what it means to love God. How do you love a being that you have never seen, felt, touched, or heard with your senses?”

MONEY AND GOD (Matt. 19:16-22; Luke 12:15-23).

American author Mark Twain wrote: “Some men worship rank, some worship heroes, some worship power, some worship God . . . but they all worship money.”

Maybe those words are a bit exaggerated, but the point is well made, and it helps explain why Jesus said the things He did in both the accounts listed above.

What are the parallel traits in the two men talked about in these texts? What do they have in common?

In one sense, both these accounts are telling the same story. Indeed, what the rich young ruler did is not much different from what “the certain rich man” did. Both were so consumed by their money that they lost sight of what really matters. Basically, they loved their money and wealth more than God, and thus they proved who had their loyalty. In the end, the gist of both accounts seems to be that both lost out on eternal life. They sold their place in eternity for a few monetary pleasures here. Both, in short, were ripped off.

Think about this: No one ever bought his or her way into the kingdom of heaven; not enough money exists to get a soul there (besides, the price has already been paid). However, it doesn’t take much money to keep a person out. Millions of dollars, when contrasted to the promise of eternity, are just a pile of rubbish, and souls will be lost for a lot less than millions of dollars.

Money, of course, has its place; the problem is that it can so easily get out of its place and get into places it does not belong. “Take heed,” Jesus said, “and beware of covetousness: for a man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15). Though we all claim to believe those words, trying to live out that belief is not always so easy. Money has a powerful lure upon people that can blind them from seeing what they need to see.

Make a list of the things money can definitely buy. Make another list of things people often think money can buy but, more often than not, it does not, or at least not for long. Then make a list of the things money definitely cannot buy. Compare your lists. What conclusions can you draw about what money can and cannot do? Share your lists with the class.

OTHER GODS.

“Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord” (Jer. 9:23, 24).

Look at these beautiful verses, some of the most profound and deep in all Inspiration. Notice the three points it talks about: wisdom, might, and riches, three things that in and of themselves are not evil. God is not saying do not have these things, do not enjoy these things, do not prosper in these things. Instead, He is saying keep them in perspective; do not let them cloud out your view of what really matters.

What are the aspects of the Lord that these verses tell us to glory in? Why these?

If Jeremiah’s words had relevance when he first uttered them, how much more so today, when humanity all but glories in its intellectual and technological achievements. Indeed, these achievements are quite impressive, something we might be inclined to glory in.

Nevertheless, think about this: Of all the things we can know, what is the most important? Of course, that Jesus Christ died for our sins and that through faith in what He has done for us at the Cross, we have the promise of eternal life. After all, in contrast to that, what else really matters? (Matt. 16:26).

Yet, how do we know this, the most crucial aspect of wisdom? Is it something we can learn from pure reason alone? Or from science or technology? Can a study of mathematics lead us to it? Can we deduce the Cross—and the great truth of justification by faith through faith in the shed blood of Christ in our behalf—from nature? Can we, on our own, figure out the great truth of salvation by faith in Christ? Of course not. Instead, this truth is something that had to be told us, spoon-fed to us through revelation.

What does it say about the limits of human knowledge (unaided reason) and wisdom that it can never teach us the most important thing we need to know? Why, then, would it make no sense to worship or make a god out of what cannot even answer the most crucial of all human questions to human existence: How are we saved?

“LOVERS.”

“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away” (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

Paul here talks about the last days as “perilous times.” He is not referring, it seems, to peril in the sense of having to worry about physical danger, such as from an errant nuclear weapon; rather, the message seems to be warning of spiritual danger.

Who is Paul talking about here? When you read the list of characteristics, they seem pretty bad, and, yet, whom is he referring to? That answer might help explain what he meant by “perilous times.” What does it mean to have the “form of godliness”?

Two times in the texts above, Paul talks about “lovers”: lovers of themselves and lovers of pleasures. It is not wrong to love oneself (Matt. 22:39); and there’s nothing wrong with loving pleasure. God didn’t create us with physical desires and create all around us the means of satisfying them, only to hold them back from us, did He?

Of course not. Instead, what’s being said here is what has been touched on all week: the danger of allowing things to spin out of control, even good things such as wealth, wisdom, power, or pleasure, until they assume a place in our lives they should not. We cannot serve two gods: Jesus made that clear, and whatever we love supremely becomes our god.

When people become lovers of themselves, at the expense of everything and everyone else, they make themselves out to be their own gods (Gen. 3:5), and when that happens, evil follows.

In fact, look again at the list of how people would be in the last days. It is not that hard to see how those things can stem from a life in which love of self rules. The problem, Paul says, will become so acute that people who claim to love the Lord will create a theology that justifies them in their selfish actions and attitudes.

Read Matthew 16:24. What is Jesus saying here that can spare someone from these “perilous times”? What does He mean by those words, and how can we take what He said and apply it to our own lives?

FURTHER STUDY:

Whatever shall draw away the heart from God must be given up. Mammon is the idol of many. The love of money, the desire for wealth, is the golden chain that binds them to Satan. Reputation and worldly honor are worshiped by another class. The life of selfish ease and freedom from responsibility is the idol of others. But these slavish bands must be broken. We cannot be half the Lord's and half the world's. We are not God's children unless we are such entirely."—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 44.

"'No man can serve two masters.' We cannot serve God with a divided heart. Bible religion is not one influence among many others; its influence is to be supreme, pervading and controlling every other. It is not to be like a dash of color brushed here and there upon the canvas, but it is to pervade the whole life, as if the canvas were dipped into the color, until every thread of the fabric were dyed a deep, unfading hue."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 312.

"No outward shrines may be visible, there may be no image for the eye to rest upon, yet we may be practicing idolatry. It is as easy to make an idol of cherished ideas or objects as to fashion gods of wood or stone. Thousands have a false conception of God and His attributes. They are as verily serving a false god as were the servants of Baal. Are we worshiping the true God as He is revealed in His word, in Christ, in nature, or are we adoring some philosophical idol enshrined in His place? God is a God of truth. Justice and mercy are the attributes of His throne. He is a God of love, of pity and tender compassion. Thus He is represented in His Son, our Saviour. He is a God of patience and long-suffering. If such is the being whom we adore and to whose character we are seeking to assimilate, we are worshiping the true God."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, pp. 173, 174.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In the context of this week's lesson, how does what Jesus says in Matthew 6:33 solve the problems presented?
2. If things like wealth, wisdom, and power are not wrong in and of themselves and a person can possess these things and still faithfully serve the Lord, how can a person tell when these things have gotten out of hand? What are the warning signs that should tell a person that he or she has a problem?



A Family on Fire

Félix Vasquez

Antonio Huayta was born into a poor family in southern Bolivia. Unable to care for all their children, Antonio was sent to live with Adventist relatives. His uncles and cousins are active lay workers in their region of Bolivia, and young Antonio caught their vision for soul winning.

Antonio wanted to become a minister and began selling Adventist literature to pay for his education. Eventually he and his cousin, Simar, enrolled in the Adventist seminary in Lima, Peru.

As part of their education, the cousins were assigned to assist a pastor in the city. They gave Bible studies, prepared for evangelistic meetings, and took care of other ministerial duties. One day while working in Lima, the boys were attacked by a band of guerrilla soldiers who beat Simar so badly that he almost died. The guerrillas fled, warning Antonio that they would kill him if they ever saw him again. Shaken by this experience, the cousins returned to Bolivia.

Antonio's desire to work for God has not faded. He and his uncles and cousins have accepted the challenge to plant several churches in previously unentered towns. Some of these towns had openly opposed evangelization before Antonio's family came.

The family enters a town and begins making friends with the residents. They find land and prepare a large tent for evangelistic meetings. And the family often chooses young Antonio to be the speaker. As a result of fervent prayer, faithful work, and the Holy Spirit's blessings, hundreds have responded to God's call to join with God's people, and new congregations have been established.

Word spread that this family is a powerful evangelistic team, and they were invited to preach outside the city of La Paz. God blessed, and 180 people were baptized.

Antonio has not been able to complete his seminary training. But he is determined to do God's work wherever God leads him. Antonio and his cousins are examples of what God can do through young people who have dedicated their lives to Him.

Antonio Huayta (left). Félix Vasquez is a pastor in Yacuiba, Bolivia.

