

Keep Yourself From Idols

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[0 : 00] I'll turn back to 2 Chronicles chapter 20, and I'm going to read four verses, beginning at verse 31.

The earlier reading covered the first part of Jehoshaphat's reign as king of Judah, and it's a great story.

He had a few ups and downs, but there were some classic victories where he put his trust in God, and God fought the battle for him. And the verses we're going to read now tell us about the end of his reign.

So, verse 31. Jehoshaphat reigned over Judah. He was 35 years old when he became king of Judah, and he reigned in Jerusalem for 25 years.

His mother's name was Azubah, daughter of Shilhi. He followed the ways of his father Asa and did not stray from them. He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

[1 : 14] The high places, however, were not removed, and the people still had not set their hearts on the God of their ancestors. The other events of Jehoshaphat's reign, from beginning to end, are written in the annals of Jehu, son of Hanani, which are recorded in the book of the kings of Israel.

Amen. This is God's Word. Well, this chapter in 2 Chronicles is a high point in Old Testament history.

A high point in the period where Israel and Judah were reigned over by kings. Jehoshaphat had a good reign. And yet there's one verse here which presents us with a penetrating and challenging remark.

It takes us really to the crux of the human condition. And I want to explore that with you this evening. It's verse 33. The high places had not been removed.

And the people had not set their hearts on the God of their ancestors. We'll look at this under three headings.

[2 : 37] And the first heading is this, the setting, which is a successful reign. If you take the time to read through Kings and Chronicles, you'll find the good, the bad, and the ugly of royal family in Israel and Judah.

King David was a man after God's own heart. A righteous king. A king who sinned and fell and failed. But a king who repented and always turned back to God and sought him after he had fallen.

And David is held up as the ideal standard. From that point on, the kings are more or less like David. He's the model to which they should aim to conform.

And the good kings are like David. And they do everything they can to promote the worship of God. The bad kings, perhaps just indifferent, they let things drift.

And the ugly kings, they're the kings who really even promote idolatry and encourage people to turn from God. Well, Jehoshaphat is a good one.

[3 : 57] I hope you pick that up in the reading from chapter 17. And it won't take you long when you get home. If you want to read through from chapter 17, right through to the end of chapter 20, Jehoshaphat is a good king.

And we see that the Lord was with him because he followed the ways of his father David. That's chapter 17 and verse 3.

Excuse me. He doesn't go after the idols. He always seeks God. And because of that, God is with him.

If you read into chapter 19, you have a record of him appointing men to preach God's word and setting other men to judge society to try and maintain standards of righteousness among the people of God.

The authority he had, he used legitimately to try and bring about religious reform and to turn people back to the Lord.

[5 : 16] Now, he's not perfect. He got too close to a bad king called Ahab and he had some trouble because of that. And he also got too close to another bad king called Ahaziah.

But overall, he was godly and he was good. But it's not always easy to measure success. It's not always easy to measure success.

If you work in a caring profession, particularly, there's no way of measuring success this week versus last week. Perhaps if you're in business, you can trace your bank account and the money going up and you feel you've succeeded.

Sports people, I'm not one of them. It's all the same to me. It's all people go sports in and they won the championship of this sport or that sport.

It doesn't mean much to me. It probably means something to you. Perhaps you've got a cabinet at home full of medals and trophies by which you measure your success over against the guy whose trophies are only silver or bronze.

[6 : 27] It's something visible. And yet that success can come at an invisible cost. Perhaps compromised integrity in business.

Perhaps cooking the books a little bit. Perhaps the broken relationships because you invested everything in your sport and not in your family. You hear about the athlete who fails a drugs test or the businessman who is convicted of fraud.

Well, as kings go, Jehoshaphat is about as successful as you can get on the surface. There's peace all around and the prosperity that follows that.

And we're told that there was no invisible cost. He didn't do this by playing power games, underhanded means, bullying people.

God saw his heart saw that he was inclined to follow after God and the Lord gave him success.

[7 : 37] He understood the fear of the Lord in chapter 19 and verse 6. He tells the people, consider carefully what you do because you're not judging for mere mortals but for the Lord who is with you whenever you give a verdict.

Now let the fear of the Lord be on you and judge carefully for with the Lord our God there is no injustice or partiality or bribery.

He understood the fear of the Lord. In the biggest crisis of his life, when there's an enemy alliance coming against the nation, he lays it all out before the Lord.

He doesn't go to the pagan kings and say, I'll pay your money if you defend me. He goes to God and he cries out, look at this horde who've come against us.

And are you not the God of the covenant? Are you not the God who chased the Canaanites out before us when we entered the promised land? Will you not be that God to us now?

- [8 : 44] He was a prayerful man. He obviously knew God's covenant and he put his faith in God. And humanly speaking, God's people couldn't ask for a better king, really.
- A good man with clay feet, but a good man. That's the setting, the successful reign of Jehoshaphat. But my second heading is this, the shortcoming, the superficial reforms.
- Because we have this verse, verse 33 in chapter 20. The high places, however, were still not removed. The people had still not set their hearts on the God of their ancestors.
- You might be tempted to call it the fly in the ointment. You know, the one black mark in a pretty creamy record. But it's not Jehoshaphat's fly. Let's give him the credit.
- He did everything he could. He himself did not worship idols. He sought gods. And yet the idols remained.
- [9 : 54] The high places remained. The depth and impact of any reform, of course, doesn't just depend on your leaders.
- It depends on the people as well. The people have to be willing to cooperate. Have any of you been through the Highlands recently? I don't know if they've done it in Aberdeenshire, but we woke up one morning and there were these 20 mile an hour signs stuck on the, it used to be 30 mile an hour.
- And of course, there's not enough police to check your speed. I think there's about three policemen working the whole of Sutherland and Cate Ness and on shifts, of course, one at a time.
- But when the limit was 30 mile an hour, people often slow down to about 40. And now the limit is 20 mile an hour.
- People, I think, are slowing down to about 30. You see, you have to be willing. On paper, the law says one thing.
- [11 : 05] But on the ground, in reality, it depends on people's being willing to comply. And so here's Jehoshaphat.
- He's in his palace in Jerusalem. He's doing all that he can to reform the nation. But there are people worshiping their idols on the mountaintops.
- And he's got no way of policing that. He's got no way of enforcing the law. As soon as the policemen have turned their back, the idols will come out again.
- And doesn't that reveal something about the hearts of the people? And perhaps it reveals something about your hearts as well.
- Perhaps you're willing to look like you worship God if the elders are watching or if your Christian friends are watching. But as soon as nobody else is looking, what do you do?
- [12 : 11] Well, here, the people of Judah were willing perhaps to submit to Jehoshaphat's community leaders when they were there when no one was looking. It's back to the idols.
- I think this is a challenge that every Christian leader faces, every church leader. The minister has the task of providing the means of grace to preach the word of God week by week to lead you in prayer and praise and worship, to give you counsel, to offer baptism and the Lord's Supper at the appropriate times.
- But we're utterly powerless with regards to what you do with those means. You can take a horse to water and you can't make it drink. It's the classic old proverb.
- It's true of the things of God. We can provide opportunities for formal corporate worship. The things that God has said, when you do this, I'll come near to you.
- I'll bless you. God has promised to add His blessing. But we cannot actually make people worship. I can't make you worship this evening.

[13 : 28] You might be superficially engaged, but actually, your mind your mind is still on the trophy cabinet or the fear that your dodgy bank balance is going to get found out.

Or perhaps on the football results. Or perhaps on what you're going to do afterwards. Your minds are somewhere else. Or perhaps you're engaged on a Sunday.

But the rest of the week, you're quite happy to turn back to your idols. And let me open the door into the life of a minister.

I'm not pointing the finger at all of you. It's true of us as well. We have the same battles. The same struggles. Our hearts should be in it as we lead worship.

And yet, we're just as sinful as everybody else. And we're drawn to our idols like magnets. No sooner set to pray or praise or preach than your mind is filled with your concerns and your anxieties.

[14 : 44] Things that compete for God's attention. Things that compete for your affections with God. We're in this together.

And that brings me to my third heading this evening, which is this. Sin. It's a state of rebellion. Why were Jehoshaphat's people like that?

Why, when they had such a good king doing so much good work, why were they still giving themselves to idols? And the answer is there in that verse.

Why were the high places not taken away? Because the people still had not set their hearts on the God of their ancestors. Why?

Why did the idols remain? It's a heart problem. It's a heart problem. And why are we like them? It's a heart problem.

[15 : 42] You have that heart problem. I have that heart problem. There is this great God. An awesome God. These idols, things that we set our affections on, they don't last.

They have no power. They're not alive. They can't satisfy you. And yet, there is this God and you were made to relate to Him.

You were created in such a way as a human being that you will never be satisfied unless you are saturated with this infinite, amazing being.

It's beyond your imagination. He's glorious. There's a weightiness to His presence. His reputation can never be built big enough.

Every attempt that we make to describe how good He is falls short. And He's holy. How many of the things that you pursue day by day and week by week leave you feeling ashamed or dirty because they're sinful and they're impure and you feel polluted and you feel stained and yet this God is holy and He's pure.

[17 : 11] And so, there's never any regret when a person is taken up with God. There's never any regret. It doesn't leave you feeling dirty.

He has this cleansing effect on our lives. He improves you to know God makes you better because He's good and He's kind.

And if we could see Him and if we could spend time in His presence, if we could go home and He was in our home this evening and we could sit down and have cake and tea and just get to know Him, He's delightful.

He is the most pleasant person to be with. It's impossible to spend much time with God without being filled with joy. And because He's so good, He's worthy of your love and all your allegiance and your loyalty and your confidence, but you don't love Him.

And I don't love Him the way that I should. I don't serve Him as I ought. I don't trust Him as I ought. I've got a heart problem.

[18 : 26] You've got a heart problem. It's called sin. We should love this God. And yet instead, we find we're in a state of rebellion against Him.

Our hearts get set on other things. Perhaps your heart's set on an actual idol. Not so long ago, it would be rare to find a Buddha statue or something of that nature in Scotland, but we live in times where people put these things in their home and put these things in their gardens.

If they're not actually bowing down to them, they're giving their attention to the teachings of some religious guru or other. Perhaps you've got a real idol that competes for your heart with the Lord.

Perhaps you've got material idols. Perhaps instead of an idol shelf like the pagans overseas, perhaps your sports cabinet, perhaps each of those trophies, maybe that's what you're living for.

Or maybe it's to get the highest mark in your degree because your future is all about how much you could earn. Or maybe your material idol is your car or your house being better than the McDonald's next door and being the best in your community.

[19 : 49] Maybe you've got physical idols or maybe you've got spiritual idols, personal idols that you need to be thought of as the best. You need to be the center of attention.

Your ambition, your status, it's all about you. Actually, you've become your own idol. And the thing you love more than anything else is yourself.

And the greatest commandment, Jesus says, is that you are to love the Lord your God with all your hearts, all your mind, all your soul, all your strength.

Jehoshaphat's people didn't do it. And you don't do it. And I don't do it. We don't do that because we've got a problem and the problem is sin.

The fact that we don't love God, that's sin in its essence. That's sin at its most primal. It is a state of rebellion against God so that you'll love anything rather than loving Him, even though He's infinitely lovely.

[20 : 59] Calvin, the famous theologian, John Calvin, described the heart as an idol factory.

Our hearts are supposed to be pumping out love to God like a production line. So every minute of every day we're serving Him and we're producing love for Him.

But the management of this factory hates God so much that it's changed the program. And you leave it alone for five minutes and all it will do is pump out another idol, another distraction, something else to love more than you love the Lord.

I think it was G.K. Chesterton who said, if you stop believing in God, you won't believe in nothing, you'll believe in anything. And I think we can say the same.

If you stop loving God, you won't love nothing, you'll love anything. And the world we live in is testimony to that. The diverse perversions and addictions and distractions and delusions.

[22 : 07] Everywhere you look, people are in love with anything but God. Do you know, this is so insidious that we could even make an idol of our religious performance.

We can go through the motions of religion, of Christianity. Whilst in our hearts, we're not worshipping God.

We leave the high places just where they were. The idols are still there. Why? Because our hearts are not yet set on the God of our fathers.

Do you know, Christians, this is so relentless. This is so relentless that even when the Lord wins you with His love and you know that you do love Him, you're not often grieved by how small your love is towards the Lord.

And you're not often grieved, Christian people, by how easily you're distracted from Him onto other things. Does it not trouble you?

[23 : 18] Now, what more could Jehoshaphat do? What more could he do to turn their hearts to the Lord? What more can a preacher do to turn your hearts to God?

If I berate you, is it going to help? If I challenge you, you must go home and love God more. Do you think it will work?

Perhaps you treat your own heart like that. Perhaps you're constantly beating yourself in that way. I must do better. I must do better. And you're making an idol of your own effort.

Will that turn your heart to Him? Will that turn your heart to Him? It doesn't work for me. Can I try and show you how lovely He is instead?

Because it seems to me that if I can show you how lovely He is, maybe you'll find Him more attractive than the idols that occupied you last week.

[24 : 29] think about who our God is. He's perfect. He's perfect. There's nothing that falls short in Him.

There's no limit to His power. There's no limit to His goodness. There's no limit to His kindness. If you imagine the best God you can, that falls short of who God is.

Keep reaching. Try and imagine a bigger God and a greater God still too short. Still not good enough. Every good quality is found there in Him.

Life itself flows from Him. And He has these things infinitely and without limit. And these perfections, this power that God has directed out in kindness.

And so, move on from who He is to the good things He gives you. Take the time. Count your blessings one by one. Take the time to think what He's given you just today.

[25 : 45] Your life. Stop a minute. Those breaths, He gave you those, those beats of your heart. He's preserved you.

He's kept you so that your body hasn't been taken over by some life-threatening virus or poison. He's kept you alive. He's given you your food and your clothing and your drink, your friends, your family, your shelter.

And more than that, He's given you a lot more than you need. The things you enjoy. Your hobbies. Your art. Your music. Your sport.

The things that give us joy and that we share with one another. And you need to realize that God doesn't have to give you those things. It's the outflow of His love.

He's a loving God and He simply delights to give and to give generously and to give abundantly. He's that kind of God.

[26 : 50] He's a God of love. And that love, it doesn't come because there's something lovely in you.

It's a love that flows out of who God is. For eternity, the Father loved the Son and the Spirit and the Son loved the Father and the Spirit and the Spirit loved the Father and the Son.

And so God is almost like a cauldron of infinite love that's constantly bubbling up greater and greater and it just has to overflow because God loves so much.

He's an outward moving God. Love is always considered, is always pointed towards other people. It's not selfish. It's outward and it's giving.

And so the love that exists within God Himself streams out into His creation. He wasn't content to fill a world with dull gray stuff.

[27 : 59] He fills it with life and with color and He makes sure everything has got a home and everything has got food and everything has got a mate and He just loves to love.

And doesn't that tell us why our sin is so serious? Why our idolatry is so serious? Because when I choose to prefer the Ferrari over the Nissan Micra, what are we doing here?

well it's one, it's better than that isn't it? But they're comparable. It's two cars. But God is not like that.

When I take a little wooden statue, I can't compare that to this God. When I take my sports trophy or my career or my bank balance, whatever my idol is, I can't compare that to God.

Why would I love that instead of Him? The two don't compare. And when we have idols, we're turning our hearts away from the source of love and life and light and everything that is good and putting it on a trinket.

[29 : 25] We refuse to reciprocate.

It's painful, isn't it, if you love someone and they don't love you back. But God loves us in that manner. We don't love Him back. That's why idolatry is so terrible, a sin.

We're not rejecting an abusive tyrant but a tender-hearted, benevolent father. Did you realize that your heart was that twisted?

Did you realize that that's what sin has done to you? That you were made to know this God of love and you choose not to.

You were made to know this divine lover and be loved by Him and to love Him and you've turned away from Him.

[30 : 31] But let me tell you this, in spite of all of that, He still loves you. In spite of the fact that you've rejected Him a thousand times, a million times, you've turned away from Him to follow after trinkets, in spite of all of that, the Scripture tells us that He continues to love.

And He's so determined to love that He planned a salvation back in eternity before the world was even created. He set His love on you and determined that in spite of your sin, He would love you.

And He would show that love in doing everything necessary to rescue you back into relationship with Him. And so, the Father who's loved the Son for eternity and delights in Him sends Him into the world to rescue to rescue you.

God gives His most precious belonging, the thing He loves more than anything else, that the Son in whom the Father says, my Son in whom I am well-pleased, gives Him for you.

and the Son became a man and gave His life. He suffered the murderous hatred of sinful people who hated God and hated His Son and put Him to death.

[32 : 16] death, all of the malice of humanity directed to Him. And if you or I had been there, we would have joined in, shouting, crucify, crucify.

And in spite of that hatred poured out towards Him as He died, He loved so much, He said, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. I'm hanging here, dying, so that they can be forgiven, so that they can know Your love again.

I'm experiencing all the hatred of sinful man and of sinful hell and of Satan, and I'm doing it so that they can know Your love again.

Father, forgive them. And so the terrible consequences of sin are poured out on Him. He'd always known the love of the Father and now the sky goes black.

And the Father turns His face away, and the Son hanging there says, Father, why have You forsaken my God? Why have You forsaken me? Why have You allowed me to taste what it is to be not loved by God?

[33 : 32] And the reason is because God loves you. And He's doing that so that you will never experience that rejection. He's in agony there for you.

He's sweating because of His love for you. He's sweating blood. He's crying tears because of God's love for you. He's doing all of that in order to pay God the demands of the law because you didn't love Him.

to remove all the legal consequences of your sin and of your idolatry. But not just to bring you back to some sort of neutral state, but to actively reconcile you to God.

To bring you back into a relationship of love with this God. And we're told that He rose into a new life.

A life that He's willing to give you as a free gift. He rises into a new life to assure you that God is for you and God is with you to grant you every blessing, every spiritual blessing in heavenly places.

[35 : 00] To assure you that now if you trust in Him, nothing in all of creation can separate you from that love. No height, no depth, no angel, no demon, not the past, not the future, not life, nor death.

If you're trusting in Jesus Christ, if you're a Christian, nothing, nothing can separate you from that love.

And then maybe that's not enough. Maybe that's enough for you, it's not enough for God. Because then He gives Himself again. He keeps giving Himself.

He gives Himself to us again in the person of His Holy Spirit, who takes all of these riches and reveals them to you, so that we can say that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts.

Isn't grace wonderful that the love of God would move Him to do that for you, would move Him to do that for me, when all I've ever done is reject Him, it's pure, unmerited, abounding, unrestrained grace.

[36 : 34] The favor of God, granted freely to hell-deserving sinners, to God-hating sinners. And He lets us call Him Father.

He lets us call Him Father. Tomorrow will, God willing, have communion. And in those elements, in those pictures, Jesus offers Himself to you again.

As a Christian who maybe has sinned this week and feels like, I can't come, I'm dirty, Jesus says, I offer Myself to you again.

as a Christian who is feeling weak and unable to keep going in this fight against sin, Jesus comes and offers Himself to you again.

as a Christian who is struggling to break free of their idols and their pet sins and the things you've fallen into again.

[37 : 42] And every time you say, I won't do that again, and you do. And Jesus offers Himself to you again and again and again.

And each time the Gospel is preached and the preacher says, come to Jesus, He's offering Himself to you again to receive Him by faith.

Perhaps you've never done that before. And the invitation is to you as well. Come to Jesus. Hear this message of God's love assured to all who trust in Him.

Give Him your heart. Ask Him to come and show you this love and set you free from your idolatry. And He will. He's as good as His word.

Maybe you've never heard that before and you can do it tonight. You don't have to wait. Maybe you've heard it a thousand times before and you've put it off. Well, stop rejecting Him and receive this love.

[38 : 52] Or does this love move you? Does that move you more than being beaten on the head with another rule and another law? If this love can't move you, nothing will.

How do you respond? Set your heart on Him. Open your heart to Him. Receive this love in Christ.

And love Him in return. Turn back to Him. You've lost your first love. Repent. Remember where you've fallen from and love Him again.

Do those first works again. Set your heart on Him again. Open your heart to Him again. Receive Him again. Little children, keep yourself from idols.

Amen.