

## Sermon 16, How Not to Establish a Kingdom, 1 Kings 12:25-33

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Proposition: Idolatry seems appealing, but only the true God is real and worth worshipping!

Intro: Chapter 2, Solomon established by righteousness, inheritance, and justice. Quite a contrast to how Jeroboam set about establishing his kingdom!

### **I. Jeroboam's Fortifications (v. 25)**

Our text this evening opens with an account of the founding of the rival capital, and the fortification of Peniel. Now, both of these places were existing at this time. They had been there at least since the time of Abraham and Jacob. So why does the narrator take the time to tell us this? Well, it is obviously of historical interest that Shechem was the first capital of Northern Israel. But after this point, the narrator drops interest in it. As we will see, the capital was soon moved to Samaria. But for now, it's in Shechem. Big deal, right? Well, Shechem was fairly important as a stronghold. So was Peniel. Both controlled access to major highways and could

be strategically vital. But in actual fact, I believe the main importance of this verse is the context it gives us for the rest of the chapter. This section is about how Jeroboam consolidated his rule. Most of it is given over to his religious policy. This verse is about an actual defense allocation. But the point is clear: for Jeroboam the son of Nebat, religious policy was simply part of politics. Fortifying strategic cities and establishing a state religion were just similar aspects of statecraft. One was as important, or unimportant, as the other.

Now, is the attitude the Bible encourages us to take toward religion? One Roman sage said that the common people believed the religions of ancient Rome to be all equally true, the philosophers believed them all to be equally false, and the politicians believed them all to be equally useful. Well, that's Jeroboam's attitude. He was a pragmatist to the hilt. God was simply a political football. The faith of Israel existed as a device for consolidating power.

I hope you don't believe that. I hope you understand that Christianity is diametrically opposed to such ideas. Your relationship with God, your eternal destiny according to whether you knew God or not, is not a matter of pragmatism. The faith is not something to be tailored in pursuit of popularity, political credibility, or anything else. It is probably easiest for pastors and politicians to fall into this trap. But any or all of us might try to sound more pious than we really are in front of certain people. We might say certain things to make the girl's father think we are really strongly Reformed, or Baptist, or whatever he wants us to be, even when we haven't cracked a theology book in ten years.

Brothers and sisters, the faith is not a political tool. It has consequences for our politics. You cannot be a thinking Christian and be in favor of abortion and legalized homosexual behavior. But you may not use God and His word to make yourself more prestigious, more cool in the world's eyes, more powerful and secure. You know what that's called? Idolatry. And it is idolatry to which we will turn for the remainder of this sermon.

## **II. Jeroboam's New Worship (vv. 26-33)**

Jeroboam's idolatry began when he started to think of religious policy as a means of securing the kingdom for himself. Contrast his attitude with that of David, who, after God had given him the kingdom, said, "God, I want to build a house for your name!" But that's not where Jeroboam's idolatry ended. Oh no. He made it way down the tracks.

Now, what kind of idolatry was this? Well, it was a worship of the true God in a wrong way--breaking the second commandment, rather than the first. In scholarly circles, a ridiculous opinion has gotten around about this calf-worship. Because someone dug up a religious statue of a little god riding on the back of a bull, it is now speculated that in building these bulls Jeroboam was only intending to suggest that Yahweh, the invisible, was riding on the back of these golden calves. You weren't worshipping the calf; you were worshipping Yahweh on top of the calf. Don't tell me that's ridiculous. I already know that it is.

When I first started studying this passage, I read it out of the New American Bible, a Roman Catholic translation I have on my shelf in the office. Well, here's what the footnote said in that version: "Historically, Jeroboam's innovations were not as heterodox as our narrative

portrays them. Bethel was an ancient and traditional site for worship of the Lord; and the calves were probably intended to be a dais for the deity invisibly enthroned upon them, rather like the cherubim atop the ark of the covenant.” Neat, right? I can’t say I was expecting much different from the traditional champions of image worship and a non-binding Scripture, but still, the footnote took me aback. Well, this is not a story about how Jeroboam has been treated unfairly by history. This is a story of idolatry institutionalized. The fact that so many present-day interpreters have sympathy with Jeroboam’s idolatrous ways says more about them than it does about the text.

#### **A. The Motive of Idolatry: Security (vv. 26-27)**

So what started the king down this path? Well, it started with his heart. Some people try to tell us that the Old Testament is about external observances, but the New Testament is about heart-religion. Well, I beg to differ. Jeroboam’s heart was the problem. His heart told him that the kingdom rightfully belonged to David’s descendant. More than that, his heart told him that Jerusalem was the place where the true God was to be worshipped. In fact, as an Israelite, his knowledge of the truth had not been entirely squashed by his time in Egypt. He remembered that the entire Israelite venture was about getting to dwell in the divine presence. It was about getting back into the garden of Eden after it had been destroyed. That blessing was to come through the Jerusalem temple and through David’s line. And in his heart of hearts, Jeroboam recognized that he was standing in the way of the fulfillment of that promise. His rule was not the source of reconciliation with God. But knowing that you are sinning drives you deeper into sinning, unless you repent.

Jeroboam failed to trust God’s promise. God had given him ten tribes and promised him a dynasty if he were obedient. And guess what? That wasn’t enough for him. He wasn’t satisfied with God’s promise. He wanted something more certain — more bankable. He believed his own life to be in danger, because he had a guilty conscience.

Tell me, what’s more secure? A full bank account, or God’s promise? What’s more satisfying, stolen wealth or hard-earned wealth? What is the only source of security in this changing world? Moth and rust corrupt here, folks. Thieves break through and steal. Nothing in this world is permanent. Only God endures forever. Only His plans stand forever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations. Right? So where can you find lasting security? Not in political machinations. Not in trying to appear impressive to the right people. Only in the arms of Jesus is there safety. Don’t worship security. Worship Christ, and you will have security.

#### **B. The Act of Idolatry (v. 28a)**

The central act of idolatry lies in making something to worship in place of the true God. Jeroboam was not necessarily, in his own mind, trying to worship Apis, the Egyptian bull-god, or some other god. He may very well have thought that he was worshipping Yahweh. But the essence of idolatry lies in worshipping something other than the true God. That includes worshipping the true God in a wrong way. Worshipping God in a way that He has not commanded is the same thing as idolatry. Remember how Solomon made bronze bulls and set

the sea on top of them at the temple? That was a different story. That was something used for worship, but it was not itself an object of worship. At the previous church where I interned, I lived with one of the elders for a few weeks. His wife was a dairy farmer's daughter, and she had decorated with a cow theme. She had porcelain cows, cow artwork, cow cutting boards and cow clocks, cow wallpaper, cow everything! But I did I think that she was secretly a follower of Jeroboam? Of course not, because she never referred to the cow as her god, never prostrated herself in front of it, never talked about it unless you directly asked her. But worshipping God according to the imagination and devices of your own heart is a sin. In effect, it represents Him as not being God anymore, because you're the one telling Him what He wants, rather than Him telling you what He wants.

One obvious application is not to worship God with pictures of Jesus, pictures of the Father and the Holy Spirit, and other things. Most of my seminary professors and fellow students would be very suspicious of this cross above my head. Indeed, a zeal against anything that might possibly appear to be like an image is probably the most destabilizing element of our Reformed tradition. But the point is clear: don't use pictures of Jesus as a devotional aid. They're not. Don't come up with extra good works, like fasting on certain days, that you believe earn you brownie points with heaven. They don't. Worship means doing what God has commanded, but trusting in Christ and not in the perfection of your own worship.

### **C. The Appeal of Idolatry (vv. 28b-33)**

Well, security is far from the only thing idolatry offers. It's lying, but its appeal to our fallen hearts is undeniable.

#### **1. The Appeal to Authority: "Stop Going to Jerusalem!" (v. 28b)**

Some translation make it sound like Jeroboam is having pity on the poor people, who have to travel sooo faar to Jerusalem. Keep in mind, folks, that Bethel is all of 10 miles from Jerusalem. That's the distance from right here to downtown Nashua. I know that it's a little ways to walk, but it's not exactly like the people are saving a lot of time going to this new calf idol. But the Hebrew is better rendered, "You've gone to Jerusalem long enough." This is not just advice. This is royal policy. In the same way, we have talked many times about how consumerism is the official policy of the USA. You must be a consumer — it's good for the economy! Well, if you want to worship a false god, you will have no trouble finding an authority who will tell you to do so.

#### **2. The Appeal to Tradition: Aaron Did It (v. 28c)**

Now, I hope you heard these words as familiar. This almost exactly what Aaron said in Exodus 32.

ESV Exodus 32:4 And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

In other words, Jeroboam is saying, "This is not an innovation in worship! It's not apostasy, it's diversity" (Dale Ralph Davis). Those who understood the true point of the original golden calf

episode hear the words somewhat differently. Again, people of God, just because grandma kept a picture of Jesus and prayed with it doesn't mean that you should do so. Our worship is according to God's commandments, not according to "lost Christianities" that flourished in the first and second century.

Also notice that the true God is the one who delivers from Egypt. Don't worship non-delivering false gods. Worship the true God, and serve Him only!

### **3. The Appeal to Antiquity: It's the Old-Time Religion (v. 29)**

Indeed, Jeroboam is savvy. Bethel is where Abraham built his first altar in the Promised Land (Genesis 12:6). Dan was the site of idolatrous worship served by no less a person than the grandson of Moses, as you can read about in Judges 18. In short, it can seem like the human race has been worshipping security, money, sex, and power for a long time. And we have! But antiquity is no guarantee of authenticity. The fact that Abraham and Moses' grandson worshipped in a certain way does not make that way right, any more than the fact that J. Gresham Machen or John Calvin worshipped in a certain way makes that way right. Our trust is in the word of God, not the big names of men.

### **4. The Appeal to Popularity: Everyone's Doing It (v. 30)**

Have you ever wondered why we serve both wine and grape juice in the communion tray when you will never find "grape juice" in the Bible? The answer is simply cultural pressure. Virtually every Protestant church in America began to use grape juice during the temperance movement. Now, that is a prime example of worshipping in a certain way because cultural pressure says to do it. Nowadays, cultural pressure is toward using undirected melodies and sentence fragments in constructing songs. Those who bring this style into the church call it contemporary Christian music. And at times, instead of discussing whether broken sentences and bad grammar are appropriate for a God of meaning and orderliness, they simply say that they want their music to appeal to our modern sensibilities. How popular something is is no measure of how godly it is! This vile world is no friend to grace, as I have had occasion to observe from this pulpit before.

Just because "everyone is doing it," and "they've been doing it this way for a long time," doesn't mean that it is a true method of worship. We must worship God and only God according to His commands and only His commands!

### **D. The Hand-Crafted (i.e., Stupid) Nature of Idolatry (vv. 31-33)**

Well, though our translations uses synonyms, you will find the word *asah*, "he made," used 8 times in these three verses. Jeroboam was busy. The rest of the Bible emphasizes that false gods are made with hands, but we have a temple not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. In other words, the very fact that our Jesus is not hand-made, but God-made, is why we worship Him. Let's see what Jeroboam made.

#### **1. He Made Houses of High Places (v. 31a)**

The NKJV has "shrines on the high places," but the Hebrew literally says, "A house of high places." Remember how the temple was a house for God? And as we'll soon see, high places are,

to the author of Kings, a big no-no. You do not worship at high places if you truly love God. So basically, this temple Jeroboam made was a fake. It didn't hold the true God. It held high places.

### **2. He Made Non-Levitical Priests (v. 31b)**

Same with the priests. God didn't call these priests. Jeroboam made them. We could say the same thing about churches that ordain women and homosexuals: they are making clergy for themselves, but God is not calling those people to that task. He totally violated God's commands about worship.

### **3. He Made a Competing Feast of Booths (v. 32a)**

He set up a feast that was a parody of the Feast of Booths, which was supposed to happen in the 7th month. Supposedly, this feast was harvest-dependent, and in those cold northern regions harvest happened later, so it only made sense to push it back a month. So say some commentators. The text says differently. Jeroboam was specifically trying to prevent people from worshipping God in the right way.

### **4. He Made Sacrifice to the Calves he Made (v. 32b)**

Not only did he set up calves; he worshipped them. He wasn't sacrificing to Yahweh. He was sacrificing to the calves. I hope they appreciated it.

But honestly, people, do you ever sacrifice to something you worship? If you worship stuff, you will sacrifice your life to work and make money so that you can have more stuff. If you worship sex, you will kill your children. That is, you will sacrifice them to the false god of sex. One hundred fourteen million of your fellow American parents have done it. Why not you? Where do you spend your time and money? What gives you most enjoyment? What do you worship and sacrifice to? Make sure it's not something you made yourself.

### **5. He Made High Places (v. 32c)**

Again, high places are bad news. The thinking of that day was that the gods dwelt on high--Mount Olympus! Mount Zion! Etc. That's why ziggurats are elevated. That's why the Acropolis is built up above Athens. A high place was a place of unauthorized worship, usually directed toward unauthorized gods. He put priests and everything at these high places, just to facilitate false worship.

### **6. He Made an Altar (v. 33a)**

Again, an altar--just to make worship easier.

### **7. He Devised a Month (v. 33b)**

The narrator can't resist telling us that he cooked up a month out of his own heart. The obvious implication is that he should have listened to God, not tried to invent something better on His own!

### **8. He Made a Feast (v. 33c)**

The same is true of this feast. There is no limit to the things Jeroboam made. He invented it all out of his own head, and it was a sin. Indeed, the sin of Jeroboam the son of Nebat will be harped on for the rest of the book.

## **III. Application**

So how do we apply this text?

**A. Find Security in the Promises of God!**

Jeroboam had been promised the kingdom, if he obeyed. But he preferred to try to secure the kingdom by his own savvy over trusting in God. This is the motive behind impure behavior toward the person you're dating or engaged to. This is the motive behind cheating in your business or lying on your timecard. You know that you will be rewarded if you stick it out and do the right thing, but instead you want instant gratification!

**B. Trust in the word of God rather than the traditions of men!**

Jeroboam had good historical authority for what he was doing. Unlike our Supreme Court, which seems to have failed its American history classes, Jeroboam was in touch with Israelite history. He had a knack for finding excellent historic locations, and for channeling long-dead but respected figures from history. But notice that he should have trusted in God's promise, not in the way things had been done by wicked men in Israel. God's word tells us that Aaron was wrong to worship the golden calf. It tells us how much misery came from the false worship in Dan. It tells us that worship was to be at one central sanctuary. In the same way, you can trust that God knows what He's talking about when He says celibacy before marriage and faithfulness within marriage is the only way to live. You can trust that He knows when He says, "If you worship that, it will eat you alive."

**C. Worship from the heart.**

Jeroboam's heart was in the wrong place. That was his first problem. Where is your heart when you worship? Do you mean it, or are you thinking about Monday? Are you thinking about lunch? Are you looking at so-and-so's clothes? You must truly intend to worship God, or your worship is a stench to Him.

**D. Put your confidence in realities not made with hands!**

Finally, put your confidence in realities not made with hands! The first of these is the reality of Jesus Christ, who suffered and died for idolaters like you and me. He promises not only to forgive you, but to make you righteous, to make you a true worshipper. He suffered and died for the sake of many who insult Him and break His commandments by worshipping images and seeking security from false gods. "For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:24 ESV). Won't you trust Him? Can't you trust Him? He made you, and He takes care of you. So bow before Him this night. Worship Jesus Christ, the true God who brought you up out of the Egypt of bondage to sin and death! Amen.