

psalm 115.⁴⁻⁸

⁴Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of men's hands.
⁵They have mouths, but they speak not:
eyes have they, but they see not:
⁶They have ears, but they hear not:
noses have they, but they smell not:
⁷They have hands, but they handle not:
feet have they, but they walk not:
neither speak they through their throat.
⁸They that make them are like unto them;
so is every one that trusteth in them.

Lent is a time for self-denial and the mortification of the flesh. When I think of self-denial and mortification of lust and desire, my mind goes immediately to idolatry. Many picture little wooden, stone, or metal figurines when they think of idolatry. Me? I think of American department stores with row after row of consumptive temptations. I think of our too-big houses with their richly adorned kitchens and baths. I think of our irresponsibly huge vehicles. I think of those economically left behind because of our addictive drive to purchase and possess. I think, then, of wanting and desiring. Desiring and wanting. WANTING AND DESIRING. "Covetousness," says Paul, "is idolatry."¹

We most often think of "covetousness" in relation to another and what they possess. But "covetousness" does not require "another." We are very good at wanting all by ourselves. We can easily dismiss the evil of our idolatrous consumption with a "it's not that bad," or "there are worse lusts, like sex," or "it is just our culture"—a kind of "everyone else is doing it" rationalization. This is dangerous on numerous fronts. I often wonder, for example, which is worse: the occasional sexual lust, or the incessant, near constant lusts of materialism. And it isn't simply the wanting and consumption. It takes time, lots of time, and effort to gather the resources necessary for satisfying our near insatiable consumption. Such time and effort for so little return of real value is exhausting. Who has time for anything else, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually? And, having worked so hard for so little, who is really going to want to part with any significant portion of it in order to assist others? The whole thing, the whole idolatrous system is a drag on everything and everyone.

"The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals,
and fashioneth it with hammers,
and worketh it with the strength of his arms:
yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth:
he drinketh no water, and is faint."²

It is all truly exhausting and debilitating. And wasteful. In today's reading, the Psalmist pointedly reveals the impotence of the idol and the idol worshipper. Among the many senseless wonders of the idol is that it has no feet and so cannot walk. Impotent. That's bad enough. But though the worshipper looks for profit through the idol, the idol's impotence, ironically, ends up being a drain on the

¹ Colossians 3.⁵

² Isaiah 44.¹²

worshipper. Because “they cannot walk,” Jeremiah satirically recounts, “they must needs be borne.” “They bear him [the idol] upon the shoulder, they carry him,” observes Isaiah.³

“Their idols were upon the beasts,
and upon the cattle:
your carriages were heavy laden;
they are a burden to the weary beast.
They stoop,
they bow down together...”⁴

Loaded down and wearied so, Jesus’ conclusion concerning the wealthy—the great majority of us—is of little wonder (though his disciples at the time were “astonished”).

“A rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle [or to thread a needle with a rope], than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”⁵

The Lent and Easter season should serve as encouragement for us to evaluate our individual drive for self-gratification and our insatiable wanting and desiring; our covetousness. In addition, they can serve as a time for us to consider our society’s flimsy justifications for its consumerism and how it impacts especially those who lack needful life resources. Lent is a good time to plead for help in casting our idols away and freeing ourselves of their domineering lordship—a dominance which can, ironically, make us impotent in spiritual and heavenly things, as Jesus himself testifies.

“He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.”⁶

Hence, Jesus’ warning,

“No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.”⁷

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: March 19, 2025)

³ Isaiah 46.⁷

⁴ Isaiah 46.¹⁻²

⁵ Matthew 19.²³⁻²⁴

⁶ Matthew 13.²²

⁷ Matthew 6.²⁴