

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

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Sermon Text: Isaiah 41:21-29

Sermon Title: "Wood and Gold Don't Stand Up to God"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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Last Sunday I was driving home from morning worship. I stopped by the McDonald's on Mount Zion to get my children something to eat (I bought myself some medium fries). I was listening to an interview on the radio with a psychologist who wrote a book called *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. Sounded like an interesting topic. The author of the book said that violence worldwide has declined over the last decades ever since World War II. Violence still erupts here and there – we still hear about suicide bombers and skirmishes between American soldiers and the Taliban and basic crimes that occur in our cities – but violence itself has decreased significantly.

What are some of the contributing factors that have caused it to decrease? This author/psychologist points to countries with strong governments. If the government has a considerable handle on policing its citizens, they will be less apt to become violent toward each other. Better commerce could be another important factor: the more people have and the less

things cost, the more apt they are to purchase a product than to steal it. Better education: if people are more educated, they will understand how to live and deal with people. Some have even suggested that violence has declined with the rise of nuclear weapons. In a strange kind of way, the use of the nuclear bomb in the 1940s has deterred nations from wanting to go to war with each other. They don't want to be bombed as violently as Japan was. We might not consider the nuclear bomb as a reason for why violence has declined, but some will keep it as a morbid factor.

Not once during the interview was God mentioned. There is no evidence supposedly to prove that God is a contributor to the decline of violence worldwide. Religion was mentioned, and this author/psychologist believes that religion has allowed violence to increase in certain places. People's religious views have made them more stubborn and more unwilling to see eye-to-eye with others. However, religion is not God, and God is not religion. The two are separate. Faith in God through Jesus Christ is a whole other matter, and in our faith there is no room for violence. There is no room for hatred. But God was never mentioned in the interview, or faith in Christ, or disciples trying to mirror the life of Christ who died for the sin of all.

At the beginning of Isaiah 41, God confronts the nations with all their success. God tells the nations to be silent before him, because the nations' successes have made them arrogant, and when one is arrogant one is loud and boisterous, and annoying. God reminds the nations of who He is. God is the Ruler of all rulers. God dominates the nations, overshadowing all people with his power and justice, his grace and compassion. God causes one nation to rise and another nation to fall, and God does this to make his will complete on this planet. If anybody does well for himself or herself, it is because God has chosen one to do well. The "movers and shakers" of society owe their talents and careers to the only One who has given them what God chooses them to have.

But people can become arrogant. Nations can become boastful. Both can believe that all success comes from their own hands. They are the creators of their destinies. God is never mentioned.

God won't have this. So, in Isaiah 41, God calls the nations into his courtroom in order to judge them for their good and bad actions. The nations are allowed to bring evidence to God to prove their points: are they successful with or without God? Prove it, O nations, God says. And what do the nations present to God? Their idols. Figurines made of wood and metal.

This is their evidence, their only evidence. They called up craftsmen and goldsmiths, and told them to fashion arms and legs and bodies with hammer and anvil. The craftsmen and goldsmiths work for hours and hours, days and days, perfecting their idols; but God tells them it is work and time wasted.

I like how Isaiah 44 describes the process for making an idol, starting with cutting down trees in the forest. But when the thing is finished, the craftsman bows down to it and worships. He prays, "Save me; you are my god."<sup>1</sup> And yet, it knows nothing. It cannot talk. The idol doesn't have wisdom, or even the ability to make its will known to others. God talks through his word every day. God is full of wisdom, and makes his will known every day. In fact, the thing of wood and gold has to be carried around from place to place.<sup>2</sup> An idol cannot be like God, who is present in all places at the same time.

What idols do we bring to God? What idols do the nations present to God, thinking he will be impressed? It doesn't matter which election year it is, there are presidential candidates who come to the forefront, acting like saviors. It doesn't matter which side of the aisle we sit on, Democrat or Republican or Tea Party, a

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 44:7 (44:9-24).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 10:3-13.

candidate always comes forward to say that he or she will save America. Is that what candidates are supposed to do, save us? No candidate, no person, can save us like Jesus Christ. Any president vows to faithfully execute the office of president, and to the best of his ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. There is no saving here; there is no making America “right” in this language. The language is of servanthood to the people of the USA and to God. Paul once told the Romans that we should submit ourselves to governing authorities, for there is no authority greater than God. The authorities, the president, the government, exist solely because God allows them to exist.<sup>3</sup>

The idol of education is always in front of us. There are many parents who are more concerned about the academic education of their children than their spiritual upbringing. In one of our Men’s Group classes, it was mentioned that we parents know everything there is to know about our children’s education. We know what grades they are getting, and we want them to get As all the time. Bs are okay, but don’t come home with Cs. This is drilled into our children’s minds – they have to do well in school. But do we parents ever ask our children about their

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Romans 13:1

spiritual education? Do we know how their relationship with God is going? We know what their grades are, but what is their level of spirituality, so to speak? We want our children to do well with God, don't we? That is most important. From time to time, we are all guilty, including your pastor, on focusing too much on the idol of education.

Money idols: we learned from Ecclesiastes that it would be wonderful to have our pockets full of money, but it will never satisfy us like God can.<sup>4</sup> Money is a constant idol we have to push aside, and make it serve God like we do.

And, believe it or not, religion may be lifted up as an idol for people and nations to worship. "God Bless America", we hear the motto say. What about the entire world? Are Americans the only ones who are good enough to receive the blessings of God? Such a view is narrow-sighted, and it leads to an arrogance that causes us to believe that we are the only pure-bred people of the world. "God Bless America" *and* "God Bless the World" because, God knows, we all need it.

The nations come before God with idols to prove their prosperity. Any one of us might present idols to

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<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 5:10-11.

God and think he will be impressed. God is not. He is not impressed by anything we have, anything we wearing, anything we carry in our pockets, anything we have in our cars or on our cars, nothing. In fact, God reminds us that if we have anything, it is only because God allows it.

In our Scripture passage today the Lord God says, “Present your case. Bring forth your strong reasons.” As we said before, God is calling for evidence to be presented in his courtroom. God looks over the evidence of success, and shakes his head disapprovingly. “You are nothing,” the Lord God determines. “Your work is nothing.” Before we take the verdict too harshly, notice *who* God is addressing in his courtroom. He isn’t addressing us and calling us nothing. He is addressing the idols. He looks directly at them and calls them nothing. They are not worth the wood or gold used to build them. They hold no power – they make nothing happen for us that ought to happen.

God says, “Anybody who chooses you, O idols, is an abomination.” If nations or people choose to rely on their idols of success, the idols condemn them. Idols make us tainted with sin before God. But the idols are on trial in Isaiah 41. They are sentenced to be removed and destroyed. If we do not choose to

follow those idols out of the courtroom, we will not be destroyed with them. If we remain before God, and choose to look to our Holy One, and seek his help, we are saved from any destruction.

What ought we bring before the Lord? Certainly not idols – things that we think prove our success – because they will burn up in God’s presence. We ought we bring? We can bring our worship, like we have done today. We can offer heartfelt thanks to God for blessing us in so many ways. We can bring before God our talents, and ask God to strengthen them, multiply them, use them in ways that help as many people as possible. We can bring our words, and trust God will give us the words to say at the right moments.

We can bring before the Lord our authority. If we are fathers, we bring to God our ability to lead our families, and if that hasn’t been going well we ask God to show us how to be effective fathers for our children. If we are mothers, we ask God to give us the ability to nurture our families, so they never lack for love and understanding. If we say we believe in Jesus Christ, then we are leaders; and so we pray for God to show us how to lead people to relationships with God.

We can bring our education; and pray that as we grow in wisdom, so may we grow doubly in spirit. For



every math problem we can solve, for every page in a book we read, we pray that we might know God a bit more. We want to open ourselves even wider to God, and trust God in any given situation.

We can bring money to the Lord, and ask him to show us how to use it. We can bring our religion, and ask God to show us the new things he is doing in our communities.

Most importantly, we bring ourselves before the Lord. It is we who God desires the most. Not really the things, not the words, not the talents, just us. Vulnerable, weak, empty. God loves to be with us. He loves to fill us up. He desires to patch the empty gaps in our lives. With God we learn what success is: to glorify the Lord every day and to enjoy him forever. We can carry that success toward eternity.

