

Idol behavior: 1 Kings 21; Psalm 5; Luke 7:36–8:3

by [Kathryn Greene-McCreight](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

One of my seminary teachers once said that if you can't think of anything original to preach, you should tell Bible stories—they have enough power to turn people's hearts toward God. This may not work with every text, but it certainly works with the drama and wisdom of the story of Naboth and the story of the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears. The power of the characters, their interactions and the pace of the narratives can keep listeners on the edge of their seats as the two stories form bookends to our lives and illustrate the presence of both evil and righteousness among and in us.

"You hate all evildoers," says the psalmist. How could this be said of a good God, a kindly God, a father who knows enough to give his children good things? All the more reason that God should reject all those who reject his laws, his statutes, his ways. Perhaps this is why God seems to hate Ahab—not because Ahab hates God, not in a tit-for-tat, but because Ahab is an idolator whose wicked religious practices lead to abhorrent ethics and an evil manner of life. In contrast, Jesus says that the woman who anoints his feet with oil loves him much, and that her faith has saved her.

"You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful." But how could our God be spoken of in this way, as hating the bloodthirsty and deceitful? This type of material in the Bible is very offensive to people these days. And yet we each have and even nurture our own righteous indignation against those who hate God and their neighbor.

"For there is no truth in their mouths, their hearts are destruction, their throats are open graves; they flatter with their tongues." One's life shows one's beliefs, and one's beliefs determine one's actions. Ahab's character is revealed not only in his weakness, in his being manipulated by Jezebel into having Naboth killed, but also in his idolatry; in fact, he is described as an idolater earlier in 1 Kings, before he succumbs to Jezebel's plan to concoct their evil deed against Naboth. "Ahab . . . served Baal and worshiped him" (16:31).

The problem with idolatry is that it leads to unrighteousness. As Jesus says, “The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do.” Idolatry is cruel. It is the acting-out of impure faith. The idolatry of Ahab and Jezebel is indicative of their iniquity. At the end of their story, the narrator says parenthetically: “Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols.”

“For they have rebelled against you.” The evil one is an idolater, a worshiper of statues and poles and silent, sightless images. The righteous one is the worshiper of Jesus, whose very name means salvation, who raises the dead to new life. He is neither silent nor sightless, but sees us as we are in our weakness. Our choice is to be idolaters or true worshipers, as is the nameless woman in Luke’s Gospel.

This is the most significant choice we can make. Every day, moment by moment, we choose whether to love things and play around with or even ignore God, or to love God and see all things in God’s wake.

What are our idols to which we attach our undying devotion? Ranking high among them are credit cards, stocks and bonds (our so-called securities). This pattern of debit and credit is our Asherah, our Baal in North America. When we put our trust in toys and give gadgets our greatest affection and allegiance, we become involved in acts of evil.

For example, we perpetuate the gross inequity of access to the world’s resources. While children in the two-thirds world die of dysentery, rotting teeth and malaria, children in the first world have full bellies and near-perfect teeth. Our self-centeredness allows other people’s children to suffer want while we enjoy our second homes and time-shares.

It is hard for us to wean ourselves from our possessions. What’s so wrong, after all, with owning a cell phone? After all, I can’t be responsible for the abuse of those children who are exposed to highly radioactive cobalt in mines in the Republic of Congo—a substance used in the making of cell phones. If I were to give away my phone, would my act lessen their exposure to radiation? We are unwittingly entangled in an enormous web that pulls our comforts from the backs of other people’s children. This web is often called original sin.

What to do? Wallow in our excesses, delight in our riches, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing we can do to change world poverty? Or get to work in our own

corner of the world? We can help build homes, we can volunteer in mission, give of our own resources until we have less to spend on ourselves. We must do these things.

But even these efforts will not make us righteous.

The source and perfecter of our righteousness is still that man whose feet the nameless woman anoints. Our response is to worship the God who created the heavens and the earth, to let our hearts be turned to love of our neighbor. Who will we be before the Lord? Ahab, who succumbs to his evil wife's plans, or the woman who casts herself at Jesus' feet, bending in humility to the Lord of life?