



From Chapter 3: No Other Gods - Contemplative Concentration and the Jesus Prayer. (Traveling Companion - Moses)

by *Daniel Wolpert*

The image of the spiritual leader emerging from silence, holding the book that contains God's word, is the image of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai.

He had stood in the cloud upon the mountain, had met God, and had been given tablets engraved with sacred scriptures. Yet when he returned to the camp where the people were, he was greeted with the people's idolatry of the golden calf.

The previous two chapters dealt with the fundamental elements of both the spiritual life and spiritual leadership build upon these fundamentals by each highlighting a specific aspect or issue in spiritual leadership. Ultimately the goal of spiritual life and leadership is to help God form the spiritual communities that are manifestations of the church on earth. Thus each chapter will look at obstacles to the formation of such communities and explore how a certain type of prayer practice can assist in overcoming that obstacle. In this way I hope to show how the spiritual life can flow into spiritual leadership, which in turn can foster spiritual community. In the Bible, we recognize idolatry as one of the greatest sins committed by humans. Thus it may be no surprise that idolatry is one of the most important issues for spiritual leaders to address. Idols are whatever bind and enslave us and prevent our seeing, worshiping, and following the true God. Moses is emblematic of the spiritual leader who brings God's people from bondage into freedom, liberating them from the idolatry that holds them captive. As Moses learned, this is an ongoing issue, one that the spiritual leader always struggles with both in private life and in the life of the church.

The power of idols lies in their ability to distract us. To this day, millions of people travel thousands of miles and spend large sums of money to visit the religious statues in Egypt. I remember as a child reading about the reconstruction of a temple that was moved to make way for the Aswan Dam project on the Nile River. The pictures in National Geographic magazine stunned and fascinated me. The intricate, complex reconstruction required highly skilled workers. I was amazed by the discussion about the specifications of the temple: how could these ancient people figure out how to construct an edifice so that the rising sun illuminated a statue deep inside on exactly one day of the year?

These statues and this temple structure are beautiful and powerful. They command our attention, our time, our focus. We can easily understand how they became gods. In our time and place this power to distract is no less prevalent. Consider Las Vegas. This modern temple complex rises from the desert, just as in ancient Egypt. The lights of the casinos can be seen from at least one hundred miles away. The immense palaces of wealth draw thousands, welcoming them with stunning shows and promises of fortune. Modern-day priests ply the people with food, drink, sex, and endless displays of magic and power, and then hypnotize them with spinning wheels, shuffling cards, and occasionally a gift of money. Yet as the dazzle turns the worshipers into zombies, these same priests rob the people of their money and often their very lives.

This idolatrous power is no less prevalent in the church. Anyone who has spent much time in a church community knows the many idols that reside there: the candlesticks that cannot be moved, the rules that cannot change, the order of service that cannot be altered, the only musical instruments that can be played, the donor of large sums who can do as he pleases. All these are idols because we serve them. They have power over us, and thus they rob us of our humanity and

our ability to see the one true God who lives and moves in our midst. Beyond Idolatry When you recognize idolatry's grip on you or on those whom you lead, a common reaction is anger. Moses reacted that way when he saw the people dancing before the golden calf (Exod. 32:19)! Anger arises in response both to the destructive power of idolatry and to its ability to frustrate leadership. However, although anger does contain energy that can overcome idolatry, ultimately it will destroy you and others. For spiritual leaders, understanding idolatry's prevalence and power brings better results than anger. Understanding idolatry can lead to compassion and to the idol's demise. The story of the golden calf reveals that idolatry arises when people miss God. This may sound surprising. Idolatry does not occur because people are evil or because they want to ignore God; rather, the cause turns out to be the exact opposite. As human beings, we long for God's presence. We want to serve God, to see God, to be with God. The problem is that our God is unseen. Only Moses got to see the face of our God, while the people had to wait alone at the foot of the mountain. After a while they began to miss God's presence. They wanted, needed, something to show them God was with them. So they built a golden calf that they could see. Because our senses are so powerful, the things we can see and touch and taste and feel can easily take the place of a God who, at first pass, is not obviously present. Distraction takes over, and soon we become full-fledged idolaters.

The remedy to the problem of an unseen God is a prayer practice that focuses all our attention upon God. Because the Jesus Prayer develops contemplative concentration, it is ideally suited to address the issue of idolatry. The purpose of this practice is to concentrate the mind on the name and power of Jesus. He is to be the sole object of our mind as we are faithful to the command "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3).

The JESUS PRAYER, a simple repetitive prayer practice, repeats the phrase inspired by the blind beggar who called out to Jesus (Mark 10:47): "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (See appendix for more detail.) The mind of the pray-er becomes focused on the power and presence of Jesus. As we pray this prayer, two things happen. First, we become aware of our own idols. The distractions of our mind rear their heads and attempt to divert our attention. Our projects, our habits and patterns of behavior, whatever we are anxious about, all become very clear to us as we strive to focus on Christ. Second, these idols begin to lose their power over us. The more we focus our mind upon Jesus, the more he comes to live in our heart and mind, occupying the central place that a god inhabits. With each repetition of the prayer, Jesus becomes more real. Jesus becomes more alive and powerful in our life; Jesus becomes the one God on whom we concentrate to the exclusion of all other gods.