

# When Hero Worship Becomes Idolatry

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Acts 14:8-20

This bizarre tale unfolds in Lystra, a colony on the fringes of the Roman empire. This is about as far from real civilization as Paul ever got. Think Fort Hawkins on the edge of a yawning frontier, long before there was a Macon. Lystra is certifiably pagan territory in the heartland of modern-day Turkey. The locals don't even speak the King's English, only an unintelligible local dialect. Thus, Paul and Barnabas are in the dark as their new found admirers babble about coronating them as gods. Only when the priest from Zeus' temple shows up with garland-draped oxen to be sacrificed in their honor, do the bewildered missionaries catch on. Then with great energy and revulsion, they resist the attempt to turn them into gods.

Now this is one of those Bible stories where the characters appear so primitive and naive, we're apt to dismiss the account with an indulgent chuckle. "What does any of this have to do with us?", we wonder.

Well, let's start with professional sports. Barry Bonds finally hit the big one, number 756, drilled to the deepest part of San Francisco's AT&T Park. now the argument begins about whether his record should have an asterisk by it, indicating a record tainted by charges of steroid abuse.

Meanwhile, in a summer peppered with sports scandals, Falcons' star quarterback, Michael Vick, is indicted for running a dog-fighting ring on his Virginia estate. NBA ref Tom Donaghy is charged with throwing games after getting in bed with bookies. And several riders in the famed Tour de France--including a leader of the pack--are expelled for using performance-enhancing drugs.

And yet, does anyone seriously believe these scandals will imperil the adulation Americans heap upon their sports heroes? There's certainly no sign of that. The Saturday after these scandals broke a record 717,000 fans poured into Major League baseball stadiums across the county. The NFL fully expands fans disaffected with Michael Vick to more than offset by his avid defenders. Even soccer, long the Rodney Dangerfield of American sports, is riding high after the signing of English mega-star, David Beckham.

It seems we are genetically programmed to have heroes. And it will take far more than a few unfortunate scandals to make us give them up. All of which is to say, maybe we're not so far removed from those simple-minded citizens of Lystra as we'd like to believe.

Now I'll grant you, a certain kind of hero worship is harmless enough, even necessary. While preparing this sermon, I emailed some therapist friends in our church about the phenomenon of hero worship. They were quick to point out that hero worship is an important part of childhood. Children identify with someone they admire and hope to be like when they grow up. Adolescents also latch on to heroes in an effort to fashion an identity separate from their families-of-origin. Naturally, we hope and pray our children will choose heroes from church history or the Bible, rather than from popular culture, but choose heroes they will. Even adults can identify with a heroic figure in such a way that it encourages rather than stifles their growth as a person.

Recently, I was walking through an assisted-living facility, enjoying the signs and decorations the residents posted on their doors. Such signs put a personal touch on the institutional decor. "Please knock; this is my home," is one of my favorites. But imagine my surprise when I came upon a sign on a resident's door that proclaimed, "Free Paris Hilton!" Now I might expect to see such a sign hanging from the wall in a teenager's room, but on the door of a senior adult? But then I don't know what it's like to feel trapped in a space, however inviting, you're not free to leave.

That kind of identification with a public figure who in some measure, becomes our "hero," is innocent enough. We identify with someone we admire and strive to be like him or her. But there's another kind of hero worship that elevates others to a Godlike status at the expense of our own growth and development. That's the kind of hero worship we see in Lystra and maybe, if the Spirit pricks our conscience, we may even see in ourselves.

What then are the characteristics of hero worship that is turning to idolatry? First, such hero worship diminishes rather than grows the self. We are flirting with a destructive kind of hero worship when we put someone else so high on a pedestal, it is impossible for us to reach such dizzying heights ourselves. As a result, we settle for admiring that person instead of using their example to challenge and grow *us*.

I'm reminded of the pastor leading a Bible study about the universal nature of sin. In making his point, he asked the rhetorical question, "Have any of you ever known a perfect person?" To the minister's surprise, a silver-haired gentleman on the back row timidly raised his hand.

"You've known a perfect person?," asked the pastor.

"Oh yes," said the man. "This person didn't have a single fault or failing."

"Well, I'd like to meet this individual," said the pastor, his skepticism on the rise. "I've never known anyone like him."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible," said the man, "for this saintly soul has passed on."

"Well, at the very least, tell us who this gentleman was who never did a wrong."

"His name was Edward," the man replied. "He was my wife's first husband!"

Idealizing others in this fashion is paralyzing. It leads us to despair of ever becoming such a person ourselves. We wind up worshiping--or alternately hating--the supposedly perfect soul we can never be like. In making him or her larger than life, we shrink and diminish ourselves.

Just watch the would-be worshipers of Paul and Barnabas in action. The more they worship Paul and Barnabas, the more they cease to be mature, responsible adults. Soon they are a mob, each person borne along by the tide of popular opinion, a helpless bobber floating on a turbulent sea. We see the same phenomenon in our day when people let a popular commentator or talk show host, whether of the left or the right, turn them into "ditto heads."

By contrast, notice how vigorously Paul and Barnabas resist being idealized and even deified. Realizing the crowd wants to put them high on a pedestal along with the other marble figures in the Roman Pantheon of gods, they tear their robes in a ritual sign of anguish. Then they rush into the crowd, grabbing their would-be worshipers and shaking them as they shout, "Friends, we are mortals just like you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these worthless things to the living God!"

As men of spiritual stature and moral integrity, Paul and Barnabas feel no need to be worshiped. To the contrary, they are in the business of pointing people beyond themselves to the living God. It's like the story of Billy Graham, greeted by a man in an elevator. After a few seconds scrutiny, the man asked, "Aren't you Billy Graham?"

"Yes," Dr. Graham answered, "I am."

"Well," said the awe-struck stranger, "you are truly a great man."

Dr. Graham smiled and replied, "No, I'm not a great man, but I have great message."

Paul and Barnabas do their best to point the crazed mob beyond themselves to the good news they have come to preach. Here for the first time we see them speaking to Gentiles without the benefit of a Jewish witness. Thus, Paul and Barnabas cannot begin by appealing to the Hebrew scriptures, their usual practice. Instead, they point to the creation as bearing witness to God's goodness and light as Paul will later do in

Athens: "Turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good, giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy."

Yet "even with these words," Acts solemnly notes, "they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them."

So what incited this hero worship turned to idolatry? Frankly, Paul bears some of the blame. The bedlam begins when he heals a man crippled from birth. Such healings do not figure prominently in Paul's ministry in Acts. Mostly, he just preaches, argues with the opposition, and then gets beat up. But here he notices a man listening intently to his preaching. Moved by compassion, Paul heals him.

Now the Scripture takes pain to note Paul determines the man has the faith to be healed. In other words, this miracle of healing is not something done *to* the man but *with* him. He must contribute something to his own healing, namely, faith in the good news of Jesus. But to the gawking crowd, that is easy to miss. So far as they can tell, Paul--in the tradition of Zeus and Hermes--is doling out divine favors and they want in on the action.

This is another characteristic of hero worship as idolatry. We come to believe the hero has magical powers he or she can pass on to us. In other words, we don't have to do the hard work growth and healing usually requires. Just our association with the hero will magically solve our problems. Hence, an emphasis on miracles is typically part of those larger-than-life figures that emerge in some Christian circles. By listening to the gilded tongued televangelist and sending in our cash contribution, we can position ourselves for wealth and prosperity.

That's one way to tell the real gospel of Jesus from pretenders to the title. The real gospel does not promise magical deliverance. If you doubt that, ponder the fates of both Paul and Jesus: one was beheaded the other crucified. The real gospel promises God will be *with* us in suffering--growing our spirits in and through suffering--but there are no waivers for bearing your cross. C. S. Lewis said it best in his book of essays, *God in the dock*: "I have an elderly acquaintance of about eighty, who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and self-admiration from the earliest years, and is, more or less, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know. . . . I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Christianity is not hero worship, not even of Jesus. Nor is it's purpose to make you happy in the usual sense of the word. The purpose of Christianity is to make you like Jesus. And that comes not through admiring Jesus, but following him. As Jesus

says in Luke's "Sermon on the Plain," "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do the things I tell you?" (Luke 6:46).

And finally, perhaps the most shocking part of the story. In one moment, Paul and Barnabas are being worshiped as Gods; in the next, they are being viciously attacked. Paul is beaten so savagely he barely escapes with his life. He only survives because knocked unconscious, he is taken for dead. The mob, swollen with bloodlust, dumps his body on the garbage heap, just outside of town. It's quite a reversal. In a single day, Paul goes from being a god to being garbage.

This is the final movement of hero worship as idolatry. It demeans rather than grows the self; it cuts people off from the living God, turning religion into magic; and sooner or later, the hero fails to deliver and must be destroyed. As seasoned pastors soon learn: the people most apt to idealize the minister, are the same people most apt to try to kill him. The same thing happened, as I recall, to Jesus. On Sunday, he was greeted with "Hosanna, Hosanna!" By Friday, the crazed mob cried, "Crucify him, Crucify him!"

Yes, hero worship is dangerous stuff. Very easily it turns to idolatry. So instead of chuckling at those silly, naive folk in Lystra, maybe we should learn from their story and take a long hard look at ourselves.

But here's the good news that got drowned out in the melee at Lystra: Jesus can liberate us from our idols and draw us into a relationship of trusting love with the living God. And he doesn't do this by offering us easy deliverance. He does this by offering us himself. As we come to know and love him--not as a idol on the outside but as a vital spiritual presence from within--then we become more and more fully ourselves. Not a clone of somebody else, mind you, but a bold and beautiful son or daughter of God.

Journalist Tom Junod tells about a young man who suffered from cerebral palsy. The boy lost most of his motor skills and the ability to speak. Communicating thru his computer, he told his mother he wanted to die.

There was one thing that seemed to bring the boy a measure of relief: watching "Mister Roger's Neighborhood," the one-time children's show. Mr. Roger was a kindly, grand fatherly soul who communicated the value and worth of every person. His calm demeanor and graceful spirit gave this tortured little boy hope.

Eventually, a children's foundation set up a meeting between the boy and Mr. Rogers. Upon meeting his hero, the boy was so emotionally overwhelmed, he began hitting himself. His mother took him to another room to calm him down. Upon the boy's return, Mr. Rogers shared some precious time with his admirer. Then he ended the conversation with a startling request: would the boy pray for him?

Naturally, the boy was floored. He had always been the object of somebody else's prayers. Now his hero was asking for prayer from *him*. Just the thought of it filled the boy with a sense of worth and honor. From that day forward, his life took on meaning and momentum as he prayed for his hero each and every day.

Upon hearing this story, the seasoned journalist, Tom Junod, complimented Mr. Rogers on handling the boy with such skill. Rogers reacted with surprise. He had been sincere in his request. As he explained to the stunned newsman, "I didn't ask him for his prayers for *him*. I asked for *me*. And I asked because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God."

The good news that got drowned out at Lystra, is God's good news to you: because of Jesus, we don't have to be a hero nor worship one. Instead, we can grow to love the Lord our God and our neighbor as our self. Maybe we should take the energy we're wasting on our heroes and use it to follow him.

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