

## **DON'T BE ANYBODY'S IDOL!**

**Today's Text: Acts 14: 1- 18**

### **Extracts:**

**And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother's womb, who had never walked. This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, said with a loud voice, "Stand up straight on your feet!" And he leaped and walked. *Now when the people saw what Paul had done, they raised their voices, saying in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!"* And Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker... *But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard this, they tore their clothes and ran in among the multitudes, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God"* [Acts 14: 8-15]**

*Oklahoma City Thunder (OKC for short) recently won its first Western Conference title in the 2012 US National Basketball Association (NBA) championship.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, it beat the defending champions, Dallas Mavericks, 4-0, the Los Angeles Lakers, 4-1, and the San Antonio Spurs, 4-2. Those three teams together won 10 of the last 13 NBA championships. Driving the OKC feat was a 23-year-old forward, Kevin Durant, who joined the NBA in 2008. Within that short period, he has won the NBA Rookie of the Year 2008, NBA All-Star Game MVP 2012 and NBA Scoring Champion 2012. Therefore, he is treated as an idol by basketball fans. On Wednesday, June 6, 2012, as the final game against the Spurs was a few seconds to go, OKC fans were already chanting the name of their idol. However, to everyone's surprise, Durant jumped into the stands, embraced his mother and brother and said, "Thanks for driving me to practice...for attending my games...for disciplining me...I never want to take those moments for granted." His humility drew more applause than his feat on the basketball court.*

*It is quite tempting at the moment of your triumph to behave as an idol, to be worshipped by fans, family and well-wishers. However, to allow yourself to be idolized is to give the glory of your success to man instead of God. That is idolatry which God hates. Can you afford that? In this week's study, the people of Lystra tried to treat Paul and Barnabas as gods over a miracle. How did they react? Find out from this week's study.*

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<sup>1</sup> Story is based on the following sources: Jen Floyd Engel, "We can all feel good about Thunder," June 7, 2012; <http://www.foxsportssouthwest.com/06/07/12/We-can-all-feel-good-about-Thunder-msn-landing.html?blockID=742542&feedID=3589> ; and "Kevin Durant," From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin\\_Durant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Durant)

## 1. Background: Paul and Barnabas are idolized

The *Hollywood Walk of Fame* is made up of more than 2,400 five-pointed terrazzo and brass stars embedded in the sidewalks along fifteen blocks of Hollywood Boulevard and three blocks of Vine Street in Hollywood, in the Los Angeles County of California, USA.<sup>2</sup> The stars bear the names of actors (and actresses), musicians and others that have made significant contributions in the entertainment industry. It is a popular tourist destination, with reportedly more than 10 million visitors per year. Such tourists come to stand on their heroes' monuments and, in most cases, take memorable pictures. We all have our heroes (heroines), role models and icons that we model our lives after. They could be family members or political or spiritual leaders or professional mentors and sports stars. Consciously or otherwise, we say or do things to suggest how much we have modeled our lives after them. Popularly, we call such people our idols.

Ordinarily, *there is nothing wrong with looking up to people as your idols or role models, provided you do not treat them as idols*. For example, writing to the Philippian church, Paul said, "The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, and the God of peace will be with you" [**Phil. 4: 9**]. Certainly, he was asking his admirers to see him as somebody leading them to a higher being, not to himself. *In the eyes of God, anything that we value or put above Him is an idol* [**Ex. 20: 3-6**]. *It could be a carved image or a false god or an indulgence that distracts us from giving all the glory of our success in life to Him*. Unfortunately, it is quite easy for any of us to fall off track! We easily get carried away when we receive praises and accolades from admirers and praise singers and then take full credit. Most of us are attention whores (i.e., those who lust after attention) and yet we cannot handle what follows. That is why this week's study should bring us back to reality- to steer us away from the seducing spirits that put fuel on our self-worth over and above our true worth in the sight of God. The question that we shall attempt to answer in this study is this: *How should we respond to adulation without offending God?*

This week's Bible story is a continuation of the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas after the Holy Spirit had sent them away from the church at Antioch [**Acts 13: 1-3**]. In Iconium, they both stayed a long time, speaking in the synagogue where a great multitude of those who heard them (both Jews and Greeks) believed, especially after seeing "signs and wonders" granted by the hands of the apostles. However, some people stirred up dissent and "a violent attempt was made by both the Gentiles and the Jews, with their rulers, to abuse and stone them." In view of that, they had to flee to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding region [**Acts 14: 1-7**]. Our study takes off from there and we shall examine the theme as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hollywood\\_Walk\\_of\\_Fame](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hollywood_Walk_of_Fame)

a) *A miracle was performed through Paul*

In Lystra, where Paul and Barnabas were preaching the gospel, there was a man who had been a cripple right from birth. He heard Paul speaking. Paul observed him intently and, seeing that he had faith to be healed, said to him with a loud voice, “Stand up straight on your feet!” The man leapt up and walked [vv. 8-9]!

You can imagine the electricity in the air in that place after such a great miracle. Paul and Barnabas would feel vindicated that God had indeed sent them on their mission and the Holy Spirit had confirmed it to their listeners and hearers. The believers would be strengthened in their faith that they could be made whole through faith in the Lord Jesus that Paul and Barnabas were preaching. You can be sure the kind of exuberant celebration that will also follow in your place of worship should such a miracle occur.

b) *Paul and Barnabas were idolized for it*

However, the people who saw “what Paul had done” read the event differently. As far as they were concerned, “the gods ha[d] come down to [them] in the likeness of men!” They called Barnabas Zeus<sup>3</sup> and Paul, Hermes<sup>4</sup> “because he was the chief speaker.” The temple of Zeus was in front of the city. Its chief priest brought oxen and garlands to the gates with the intention of offering sacrifices to the visiting “gods” in their midst [vv. 11-13]!

***The people treated the apostles as idols worthy to be worshipped.*** That is not far-fetched when you know how some worshippers in modern churches treat their priests and pastors, especially those of them who report miracles in their revival services. You can imagine how much protocol they will build around the head of your local church should you seek to see him. Even in the time of Jesus, see the kinds of obstacles the disciples tried to place between Jesus and some people that wanted to see Him. For example, when little children were brought to Jesus, that He might touch them, His “disciples rebuked those who brought them” [Mk 10: 13]. Does it then surprise you that we tend to treat miracle workers in our modern churches as idols?

c) *But they totally rejected it!*

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<sup>3</sup> “Information about the Greek God Zeus,” <http://www.zeus-publications.com/zeusgod.htm> . Zeus was the Greek god of the sky and weather; and its image appeared on most Greek coins. Zeus is one of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World.

<sup>4</sup> “Greek God Hermes,” <http://www.greek-gods-and-goddesses.com/greek-god-hermes.html> . Hermes was the son of Zeus and the god of shepherds, travellers, merchants, and even thieves!

The word came to Paul and Barnabas that the local people saw them as gods. They tore their clothes, ran in among the multitude and cried out, saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them” [Acts 14: 14-15]. In other words, ***Paul and Barnabas refused the encomiums poured on them and rejected the accolades with which they were being decorated. They let it be known that they were mere human beings who had equally received the grace of salvation by Christ Jesus, that the miracle that they had just seen was achieved in the name of Jesus, not by their power.***

From the foregoing, we learn that there are two sides to adulation. On one hand, ***God will use you to do great things for Him.*** On the other hand, ***people will try to give the glory to you instead of to Him and His Christ. Therefore, the burden is not on your admirers or praise singers but on you.*** What do you do when they try to treat you like their idol?

## 2. How to react to adulation

The word of God says, “Pleasant words are like honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones” [Prov. 16: 24]. Most of us like to hear others speak pleasant things about us. Such words may indeed speak truth about us. The danger is what such words do to your ego. ***If pleasant words bring you closer to God, there is nothing wrong with them.*** Unfortunately, it is not so with most of us. What is your attitude to adulation or hero worship? Here are examples of what can be found in reality:

### a) *You may actually seek it!*

Some people actually like to hear others sing their praises. They will go out of their way to seek adulation. For example, they get family and friends to publish for them congratulatory messages on the pages of the newspaper or on television to mark special events, such as birthdays, anniversaries of appointments to public office or awards of chieftaincy titles or honorary degrees. Within minutes of striking a conversation with a total stranger, you know who some people are, how much money they have in their bank accounts and important people in high places that they know.

Jesus saw the Scribes and Pharisees as people who did all their works in order to be seen by men. They loved the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the market places and to be called “Rabbi, Rabbi.” Jesus warned us not to allow ourselves to be so called because only Christ is the Teacher and God is the Father [Matt. 23: 1-10]. David’s son, Absalom, was propelled into rebellion by adulation for “in all Israel

there was no one who was praised as much as Absalom for his good looks” [2 Sam. 14: 25]. He sought for such praises because he provided himself with chariots and horses and fifty men to run before him. Every morning, he would wake up early and stand by the gate used by the people who brought lawsuits before his father the king for adjudication. He would usurp the role of a judge and say, “Oh, that I were made judge in the land, and everyone who ha[d] any suit or cause would come to me, then I would give him justice.” That way, he “stole the hearts of the men of Israel.” In no time, he rebelled against his father [2 Sam. 15: 1-14]. He sought for adulation and it consumed him.

When you exaggerate your achievements (such as through embellished résumés or CVs or televised testimonies that place emphasis on your ministry rather than God’s grace), you are seeking adulation that can lead you to idol worship. ***If you find yourself tempted to seek for praise from others, quickly examine your motive. If it is to make others worship you or treat you like an idol, run! Only God is worthy to be praised and He alone you must serve.***

b) *Or love it!*

Sometimes, you may not go out to seek praise from others but you love it if they do. For example, when you accept undeserved honorary doctorate degrees or traditional or religious titles that pump up your ego to the detriment of your relationship with God, you are playing the idol. When they introduce you at a public forum and you refuse to correct exaggerated claims about your achievements, you are allowing yourself to be hero-worshipped. You are behaving like an idol which can put your relationship with God at risk.

Take the example of Herod the king that killed the apostle James and put Peter in prison. On one occasion, the people of Tyre and Sidon came to make peace with him. On a set day, he arrayed himself in royal apparel, sat on his throne and made a great speech. As he spoke, the people kept shouting, saying, “The voice of a god and not of a man!” There is no evidence that he turned down such accolades. Immediately, an angel of the Lord struck him “because he did not give glory to God” and he died, eaten up by worms [Acts 12: 1-3, 20-23]. ***Therefore, do not love to play anybody’s idol. Rather than play the god that people can carry, give the glory to the Almighty God who can carry you!***

c) *Or reject it*

According to an African proverb, when they jokingly call you a witch, you should jokingly deny it. In like manner, when others try to make you their idol, quickly and firmly reject it. That was what Paul and Barnabas did.

They refused to be treated as gods and called on their admirers to give the glory to God. Take also the example of Peter the apostle when he came to the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion that had sent for him from Joppa. As the military officer “fell down at [Peter’s] feet and worshipped him,” Peter immediately lifted him up and said, “Stand up; I myself am also a man” [Acts 10: 24-26]. In the island of Patmos where he had been exiled, John the apostle was shown revelations of things to come. As he fell to worship at the feet of the angel that Jesus had used to show him heavenly things, the angel said to him, “See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” [Rev. 19: 10]. *In all those examples, both humans and angels acknowledged that God is supreme to all and He alone must be worshipped.*

### 3. Conclusion: Be like Jesus

On one occasion, a young rich man knelt before Jesus and asked Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God” [Mk 10: 17-18]. On another occasion, after Jesus had miraculously fed five thousand men from five loaves and two small fish, the people said, “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world.” But “when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone” [Jn 6: 1-15]. *Jesus was qualified to be called good because He is Immanuel (God with us) [Matt. 1: 23] or to be made king because He came to take the throne of His father, David [Lk 1: 32] and He is the King of kings [Rev. 19: 16]. Yet, He rejected such accolades from men.* That should also be our attitude to being idolized.

The choice is clear and it is yours to make. When humans praise you, you can get carried away as their idol or reject such a temptation and give the glory to God. But always remember this. The green grass of your majesty will wither. The flower of your youth will fade. But the word of God abides forever [Is. 40: 6-8; 1 Pet. 1: 24-25]. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh [Jn 1: 14] who is the same yesterday, today and forever [Heb. 13: 8]. *Be like Him by humbling yourself at all times.*

Don’t be anybody’s idol.