

What does it mean when the Bible says, “You who hate idols, steal the temples?”

QUESTION: What does the Bible mean when it says, “You who hate idols, steal the temples?” What does it mean to “steal temples”?

Romans 2:21-22 (NIV) says, “You, therefore, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal?

22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”

ANSWER: These words were spoken by the Apostle Paul through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While Paul does not provide an extensive explanation in this passage, we can infer that there was a serious issue among some Jews living in pagan nations. They had developed the corrupt practice of invading pagan temples, stealing the idols (which were often made from precious metals like gold and silver), and either selling them as they were or melting them down for profit. This practice was sinful not only because it involved theft, but also because it contradicted the Jewish stance against idolatry.

Paul’s rhetorical question—“You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”—points to the contradiction in their actions. It was

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hypocritical for anyone who rejected idol worship to then take items from the idols’ temples for their own benefit. This was not just a breach of God’s law, but also a violation of the moral laws of the nations they were living in.

A similar issue arose when Paul was in Ephesus, as recorded in Acts 19:23-40 (NIV). Paul’s preaching against idol worship caused a riot because it threatened the livelihoods of those who made a living through idol worship and trade. The accusers hoped to find a charge of temple robbery against Paul, but the authorities found no evidence of such wrongdoing. This illustrates how stealing from temples was seen as a grave offense, both religiously and legally.

Acts 19:36-37 (NIV) states:

“Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash.

37 You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess.”

Now, why did Paul say, “You who hate idols, steal the temples”? Paul was challenging the inconsistency in their behavior. If they rejected idolatry, how could they justify profiting from the idols’

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worship? Stealing and profiting from idol worship was not different from supporting it.

Theological Insight: Paul’s argument in Romans 2:21-22 is deeply theological, pointing out the hypocrisy in human behavior. He is showing that outward rejection of sin does not justify inward contradictions or sinful actions. The issue of idolatry in the Bible goes beyond the physical act of worshiping idols; it also includes any form of participation or endorsement of idolatry—whether through theft, trade, or making a profit from the objects of idol worship.

Deuteronomy 7:25 (NIV) says:

“The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the Lord your God.”

This passage teaches that anything associated with idolatry—whether the idols themselves or the wealth gained from them—should be destroyed, not coveted or used for personal gain. This principle aligns with the biblical call to separate oneself from anything tied to false worship.

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Theological Application: Rejecting a particular sin should extend beyond just avoiding the outward action; it requires a total rejection of anything associated with it. For instance, if we claim to reject alcohol, we cannot justify stealing or selling alcohol. If we claim to reject smoking, we cannot profit from the tobacco industry. Similarly, rejecting adultery means we should not engage in businesses that cater to adulterers.

1 John 5:21 (NIV) advises:

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

This reinforces the biblical teaching that idol worship—whether physical, emotional, or material—should be entirely avoided. This includes not just the act of bowing down to idols, but also the practices that support idolatry, such as profiting from idol worship.

Conclusion: The Bible teaches us that our rejection of sin must be consistent in every aspect of our lives. We are called to flee from all forms of idolatry, whether physical or metaphorical, and live a life that honors God in both actions and intentions. Hypocrisy in our walk with God is dangerous, and as believers, we must ensure our actions align with our faith.

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