

SERVING IDOLS

The Apostle John in 1 John 5:21 warned all of us to be on guard against idols and idolatry, including false "Christ's," "False doctrines," and self-centeredness. Plus physical aids such as paintings, icons, statues of Christ, statues of virgin Mary, crucifixes, crosses and rosaries, would fall into these categories.

The attitudes we place on our own physical possessions also can become idolatrous. An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the space which should be occupied by God alone, and anything having a controlling force in our lives, leads to religious unfaithfulness.

Ancient Israel was compared to being religious and delusional, imitating the disgusting practices of the pagan fertility cults. Distorted, false concepts of the true God. Worshiping a church also constitutes a manifestation of idolatry.

Some people of today worship political candidates, promising vague concepts of change, while cleverly disguising or concealing a varieties of communism, socialism, collectivism, Marxism, or Stalinism. Coveting a neighbors spouse or his physical possessions constitute another form of idolatry.

Probably the greatest idol of all "is self," including the empirical self. My country, my church or religious traditions, my house, my team, my entertainment, my car, my spouse, or my children.

Our forefather Abraham was able to resist these covetous impulses through his faith in the true God. Not in the works of the flesh, described in Galatians 5:19-21, that have their foundation in idolatry.

If we keep our mind on God instead of ourselves, remembering that we are God's people, purchased at the expense of Christ's blood, can we insure that we are not consumed by idolatry. Although, we can and should use physical gifts God has given us, and we should not abuse them. Never in the written history of the world has there been so many things trying to grab our devotion, our interest, our wanting and our coveting as we have today, with all of the media advertisements and the internet.

Advertising and selling has become such a fine art that the world knows exactly what button to press on each and every one of us, having to do with what our likes and dislikes are. Therefore, we find ourselves constantly being offered things to covet and things that turn into idols. I know it get's tiring and it get's wearying having things thrown at us constantly! That is the way Satan works, he wears us down.

We are reminded by Apostle John, "little children, keep yourselves from idols." These are John's words of advice and warning to God's called. John called the people he loved "little children," whom he genuinely loved. This is some of the last written words of an apostle of our Father and of our Savior Jesus, the Christ in 1 John 5 :21 !

John is looking back across a long life, having had many different and unique experiences himself. He saw and heard the teachings and miracles of Jesus, the Christ. He was personally asked by Jesus to care for His natural mother. John witnessed the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ, along with the churches growth. As well as the infiltration of false teachers in the church and the falling away from truth. John knowing his time was short said clearly in 1 John 5: 21, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen." The previous verse tells us, 1 John 5:20, "And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life." Three times, true, truth, is mentioned there.

It was very important to John, and this is what he is focusing on at the end of his life. Then he adds, in the next verse 21, "little children, keep yourselves from idols." The false doctrine, which is a contrast between the true and the false teachings. Here we see the negative in relation to the one and only true and living God - the avoidance of idols.

John has many warnings of that kind because he was a very practical minister, and he advised us on how to apply God's truth in our lives on a daily basis. It is very dangerous to have only a theoretical interest in truth.

In a sense, John did not write this letter merely to give a knowledge of the truth. His goal from the beginning was he wanted to help these people in their daily life, and in their battle against the forces that are set

against them in this world. This is why he ends this letter with "little children keep yourselves from idols." John wants us to know the only true and living God, that we may know Him that is true. Because of this contrast in life between truth and lies. John 17: verse , John writes, "And this is life eternal, that they might know You the only True God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent."

John, throughout his writings, emphasizes this aspect of truth. John says if we do not have that knowledge, if we do not have that understanding, then we are not aware of the spiritual problems which are set before us, we are obviously going to be defeated.

This knowledge of God is only available through Jesus Christ, who Himself is at God's right hand. If we know Him we have eternal life, as John repeatedly reminds us, and as I am reminding us today. Knowing Him and knowing we have eternal life is the positive aspect of the truth. But if we want to make absolutely sure that we will be in that condition, we have to keep ourselves from idols.

There are constantly things in this life and world that threaten to come between that knowledge of God and us. In other words, whether we like it or not, it is a warfare; it is a fight of faith to the end! There is an enemy against us and he is active and fierce. The primary goal of that evil one that John speaks of towards the end of the letter is to come between this knowledge and us. The way Satan does that, of course, is to try to get us to fix our minds, our attention, and our hearts on something else.

Apostle John ends on this note to warn us against terrible danger. In a sense, the greatest threat that confronts us in our spiritual life is the worshiping of idols. The greatest danger confronting us all is idolatry. Idolatry stems from self-centeredness and rebelliousness. People refuse to surrender themselves to worship the true and living God, as He commands.

The world does not know how to worship God because they lack His Holy Spirit. Without God's help, His Holy Spirit, human nature tries to limit God, to the confines of physical objects he understands. People fabricate images or representations to aid them in worshiping a god, they themselves have concocted. These images that are called idols, or icons, symbols or objects of devotion. Just about anything can become their idol. The first Commandment expresses that it is a sin to place a higher value on anything, than what we place on God. Building on the foundation of the first Commandment, the second forbids the use of physical "aids" in worshiping the invisible God.

Such religious aids include: statues or paintings of "Jesus" or "Mary," nativity scenes, crucifixes, crosses, star of David, graphic symbols, steeples, stained-glass pictures of God or Christ and many other things. We see more Celtic symbols coming out, by living in such a "visual" age. We should beware of such common idols in the society around us. However, breaking the second commandment is more than the use of physical objects and aids. Our deeds and actions are always the outcome of our attitudes and our thoughts. "As a man thinks, so he is."

If therefore, we carefully scrutinize our personal lives, it is not at all difficult to discover what we really believe and what is truly important to us. God does not condemn every picture or image, but as the command states in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, "You shall not bow down to them nor serve them." It is the use of art or sculpture in worship that God condemns. It seems people often overlook "the "nor serve them." Putting images on a higher level than God Himself. Many people make idols of their houses or cars. They serve them by spending every free waking moment on them. The principle is in the attitude and value placed on them.

Solomon had God's blessing to build a temple, where he erected golden forms of the two cherubim inside the holy of holies. On the walls of the sanctuary were carved figures of fruit, flowers, trees, and such. None of which Israel worshiped. Of course, there was no image representation made of God Himself.

Actions are always the expression of a point of view, and that is why the actions always proclaim the man. So the thing to concentrate on is the outlook, the philosophy, and the belief. That is emphasized everywhere in the Bible. The fundamental error of the Pharisees was that they were so interested in the details of the hundreds of points of the man made laws, on which they were so expert, that they constantly forgot the great principles of the law. God's laws!

They showed that on one occasion, when they went to Jesus and asked Him the question, "which is the first commandment of all?" They had been having a dispute among themselves with regard to God's commandments. Just as today, people still like to argue whether one sin is greater than another. A person thinks,

'my sin is not as bad as so-and-so's.' Nevertheless, Christ tells us, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Mark 12:30 -31, Jesus' reply to the Pharisees: "And you shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, And with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like it, namely this, you shalt love your Neighbor as yourself. There is none other commandment greater than these."

That is the principle, because if loving God comes first, then our actions, our conduct and our behavior are likely to look after themselves. The scriptures always start with this, and that is why the greatest danger in our spiritual life is always idolatry. Because not loving God and our fellow human beings (that is, our neighbors) stems from idolizing oneself.

What is idolatry? Lets explore some things: an idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone! As well as anything that holds our life and our devotion, anything that is central in our life, anything that seems vital, anything that is essential to us- is an idol. An idol is anything by which we live and on which we depend rather than God. Anything that in an obsessive way- that moves, arouses, attracts and stimulates us is an idol. An idol is anything that we worship, anything to which we give much of our time and attention to, Anything that holds a controlling position in our life is an idol, where God is not the supreme figure.

Now when we look at it that way, we see how practical the Apostle John's advice is in his first epistle, his first letter. John was writing to people who had been pagan and who were still set in a pagan society, where idols had literally been made out of silver, gold, and wood, stone, and other material things, they had not gone back to physical idols. They had been called out of that idolatry and they were keeping the letter of the law by not having literal idols, that was not the danger confronting these people. The danger was the teaching of the antichrists and the dangers that have always confronted God's church, wherever it may be located.

There was no suggestion in the New Testament that any of the saints were liable to go back to literal idolatry. The Apostle Paul earlier wrote to the gentile Thessalonians, acknowledging that the reason they turned from idols was to serve God. "For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1:8 - 9).

This is the reason Paul gave for why they turned from those idols. They put the supreme Creator of the universe at the forefront of their minds, as the main goal and object of devotion and worship. God is called the "living" God here, to contrast idols, which are represented as dead, dumb, deaf, and blind.

The members of God's church, the Apostle Paul ministered to, and later that John was admonishing, faced the danger we do today. Everyone in God's church today knows that idolatry with carved and shaped material idols is a sin. What John and Paul were referring to, were not primarily the objects made by man's hands. What they warned against were false ideas, obsessions, and misdirected passions. In the Old Testament, idolatry is seen as religious unfaithfulness. One of the most common biblical metaphors refers to idolatry as sexual impurity. This also has an origin in an idolatry that is built on many forms of sexual excess. Just as sexual purity was all important under the law and prophets, for millennia. Idols have represented nature gods, fertility gods and goddesses. Idols have had long associations with fertility cults and their practices.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel even dared to characterize the nation of Judah as a religious nymphomaniac. We can see why God is such a "jealous God" and refuses to share His praise with idols. When we view idolatry from His perspective, it is downright disgusting, sleazy, perverted, debasing, and worse than the sexual activities of the beasts of the earth. As Ezekiel puts it. God warns Israel through Ezekiel, that idolatry will be punished. He reveals in Ezekiel 14 : 1 -8, the central source of idolatry. "Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, "Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let Myself be inquired of at all by them? Therefore speak to them, and say to them, 'thus says the Lord God: "everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, that I may seize

the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols. Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'thus says the Lord God: "Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations. For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the Lord will answer him by Myself. I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people. Then you shall know that I am the Lord."

God is going to handle this Himself, and He is going to bring this nation down, because of idolatry and Sabbath breaking, as He did ancient Israel. The central source of idolatry is in the heart and mind, that is where it is determined. The idolatry being spoken of here includes having a false ideas of God. Idolatry is worshiping our own idea of God, and not the true and living God, and that is an abomination!

Example: Judaism does not know the true God, since they reject the only way to the Father is through Jesus Christ. Truth is of no value to them, and is distorted into a lie. We can see why the Apostle John emphasized truth in the verse right before he turned and said, "Little children keep yourself from idols." The Apostle John was very concerned about idolatry. Anti-christ's and Judaism has been denying the teaching that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. And they had been denying that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God.

We can clearly see that as human beings we are totally incapable of righteousness on our own. We must have the mind of God, and we must have His Holy Spirit to empower us to be able to begin to live without idolatry.

Some people get so enthralled with ideas that they forget that God first loved us. Some of God's called neglect the practice to imitate God's way of life. Anything that occupies this central position once called is committing idolatry. Covetousness is idolatry. Covetousness is a strong desire for and a seeking after, material things, that become objects of our worship, if we hold them as more important than our Creator God. Someone else's house or car can be an idol if we covet them. This attitude is identified with idolatry because it replaces God with self-interest and visual things.

Any earthly desires, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, have an association with idolatry. Col 3:5-6, "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry: for which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience." The wrath of God is coming upon those who are guilty of covetousness, which is idolatry.

Since an idol is an object of adoration, one who is covetous becomes an idolater. "For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph 5: 5 - 6).

Some of the strongest language in the Bible is used for idolatry: abhor, detest, provoke, rebellion, stubbornness, disobedience, abomination. The prophets characterize idolatry as a bullheaded, willful disobedience of God's laws and even of natural laws. Remember that the ancient pagans used to commit all types of sexual perversions to worship their idols, where even the natural laws were willfully disobeyed.

There are times when we are tempted in ways that lead to idolatry. These are times for pause and reinforcement from God's Holy Spirit. Paul writes: Wherefore let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. There has no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it. wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry" (1 Cor 10: 12 -14). Here we see an association between temptation and idolatry, and God is the one that brings us away and helps us to resist idolatry.

To fight these tendencies, we have to reflect on the sure promises we have been given, when we realize and understand the amazing blessing of knowing God, then everything else pales into insignificance. God wants us to worship Him directly, rather than through some idol. He wants us to worship Him humbly, and in sincerity and truth.

Idol worship is degrading to the worshiper and an abomination to God. When God calls us into His own spiritual presence, He wants us to worship Him directly. In the sample prayer we are advised, that when we pray, we should begin with something similar to "our Father who is in heaven" - this is a direct acknowledgment of Him. Yes, we have our advocate, our mediator, but we pray to God the Father directly, just as Jesus, the Christ did. God looks to those who worship Him in humility and respectful fear and sincerity and truth.

Before God calls us to His way of life, we are completely immersed in idolatry. Then conversion began the long process of coming out of idolatry. At first, we leap out of the world and any association we may have had with literal material carved or molded images. But the thoughts and mental idols of the heart take much longer to overcome.

The Apostle John warns, "little children, keep yourselves from idols." 📖

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