

“Watch Yourselves: The Lure of Idolatry”

Introduction: You’re surrounded by hundreds. Many arms are raised up toward the heavens. Some people are dancing in the aisles. Tears of joy stream down the face of the man next to you. Where are you? Are you at a large worship gathering at the Fleet Center, or celebrating a World Series victory at Fenway Park? Have you ever stopped to think about how modern sport taps into our religious impulses? Grown men, with bodies and faces painted, are simply expressing their craving for community, their longing to share their passion with others. They are exhorted to have faith, hope, and love. Faith: to believe in their team. Hope: for its future. Love: no matter what ownership or management does. And they seek to find meaning and significance in being a part of a story larger than themselves, especially if it’s a worst to first, triumph of the underdog kind of plot line.

But sports, while it taps into these impulses, can never truly satisfy. Even if it’s been a successful season, ending with an exhilarating, last minute interception on the goal line to seal a Super Bowl victory, the next year it will need to happen all over again, or depression will quickly set in. That’s the problem with idols: they never truly satisfy our quest for meaning and purpose and security. These god substitutes can only take us so far.

While he didn’t have a Super Bowl or World Series to worry about, as Moses continued to prepare the Israelites to break camp and head into the challenging Canaanite culture they would find in the Promised Land, living among it and shining the light of the Lord within it, he knew that idolatry would certainly be a problem. In a land that would be littered with other gods, the LORD’s people would need to think deeply about his uniqueness, guarding against the lure of idolatry if they wanted to remain distinct from their culture and care with God’s grace for it. Though we are not tempted, by and large, to worship idols made of wood and stone, the playing field in which we find ourselves called to extend the hospitality of Jesus is filled with substitute gods, stuff and activities and ways of living that people have turned to in their effort to quench their deepest thirst. So let’s look a bit more closely into idolatry, particularly its roots, and then consider how, if we’re to minister to our own idol laden culture, we can guard against its lure.

I. The Roots of Idolatry

A. Understanding the prohibition against idolatry begins with understanding what went down at Mt. Sinai, when God revealed to his people his will for them, beginning with the Ten Commandments. That event was a kind of cosmic audio-visual experience, as Moses reminds his listeners, the next generation:

You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness. Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, the Ten Commandments . . . [4:11-13]

This was an amazing event to be sure, and the people who were there saw something, but it was not, importantly, a form of God. Instead, it was an awesome display of his power. What was more significant, and what really mattered, was not the visual but the audio, God’s voice. God chose to reveal himself through words. We see things of God to be sure. But what we see in nature, God’s creation, as Paul describes it to the church in Rome, are God’s invisible qualities: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made . . .” (Ro. 1:20). What reveals who he is in particular, his character, and how we come into and live within a relationship to him, he has revealed verbally, through his word. Therefore, we are to be a people who listen, who hear, and

through hearing, obey. So, any attempt to make an image of God and worship it is futile, not because it is physical but because it is dumb. An idol, though visible, cannot speak. The LORD, though invisible, is eloquent.

B. But that also is why idols are so attractive! They are attractive because they don't speak and allow us to be in control. They enable us to limit or reduce or ignore the authority of God and put ourselves on the throne instead. In effect, idolatry turns the nature of things upside-down. It takes God, the Creator, from a position of authority over us and puts us, the creature, over him. It's like the pot trying to form the potter! This great reversal is hinted at when idols are described by Moses as something formed like a human being, or a land animal, or a bird, or a fish, or one of the heavenly bodies. Do you recognize this list? It's the way creation is described in Genesis 1, but essentially in reverse order! Idolatry, in other words, perverts and turns the whole created order upside down through the worship of something the Creator has made rather than the Creator himself.

C. Paul certainly seems to have had both Genesis and Deuteronomy in mind when he describes idolatry as the way humanity has fallen into sin:

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator . . . [Ro. 1:22-25]

1. One of the key terms here is the word "exchanged." Because we were made to be in relationship with God, we can't just deny him without putting something else in his place. An idol is a substitute god, even if it's something good, if it becomes an ultimate thing.

2. A second key term is the word "lie." Here, also, Paul has the opening chapters of Genesis in view. There, we hear in the dialogue between the serpent and the first human beings endowed with the breath of God that God has instructed them not to eat the fruit of one particular tree. Everything else is theirs to enjoy. What's interesting, and perhaps puzzling at first, is that God never tells them why that tree, just that they will die if they eat of it. But it seems that he never tells them why because his call on them was to love and trust him for who he was in himself, not just to behave in some way. But the serpent slyly suggests by twisting things around that God didn't really have their best interests in mind, that God wasn't really for them, that he was holding back in some way and that they should go for it because neither God's character nor words could be trusted. This is the lie that we humans have been believing in one form or another ever since. The lie of the serpent—that we can't trust God's goodness or his commitment to our well-being—is the root of idolatry, the root of our looking for substitute gods.

D. Now, as we think about this lie, we need to mention that idols are not just statues made of wood or stone and placed on pagan altars, so that we can say, "Well, I certainly don't have any of those things laying around my house so nothing here applies to me." The prophet Ezekiel actually speaks of setting up idols in our hearts, and the NT goes on to describe idolatry in terms of anything ranging from immorality to greed (eg. Eph. 5:3-6). If we put all of the Bible's teaching on idolatry together, what we find is that we can make an idol out of many things, even good things, when they become ultimate things. We can make an idol out of a career, a relationship, a child, a social cause, our social standing, exercise, a form of recreation or pleasure . . . you name it; the list is almost endless.

And we need to know that this breaks God's heart! When Moses declares God is a consuming fire and a jealous God, he is simply saying that because of his love for us, God is opposed to anything that comes between us and him, anything that can enslave us and lead us away from him, because

he knows that he is the only thing that can truly satisfy our desire for meaning and purpose, and he is the only one who can rescue us when we go astray.

II. Guarding Against Idolatry: Recognize, Repent, and Replace

A. How, then, might we begin to think about guarding ourselves against the lure of idolatry? First, we need to know ourselves, and to recognize where and how we may be exchanging the glory of God for something less. A few sample questions may be helpful here:

- When we're alone and it's quiet, what do we habitually think or dream about?
- What do we fear? What gives us nightmares? What, if we lost it, would make us feel insecure?
- What causes us to lose hope? Where do we turn when we don't get what we want? What causes us to despair if we don't have it?
- What do we need to feel loved or accepted? What do we want others to think about us?
- What do we feel we need to have to achieve meaning and purpose?

B. Second, once recognized and identified, we need to repent. We need to acknowledge that we are making something ultimate and absolute in the place of God. Confess, and name what that is so that its hold over you can be broken. It's in confession that healing begins.

C. Third, since repentance means not only to confess but to turn around and start moving in the right direction, or to put things back right-side up, we need to replace that idol, our misplaced affection, our god-substitute, with the beauty of Jesus, the one who can truly fulfill us.

As Tim Keller has put it, "the living God, who revealed himself both at Mount Sinai and on the cross, is the only Lord who, if you find him, can truly fulfill you, and if you fail him, can truly forgive you."

Jesus, actually, is the one idol, the one image, that God not only allows but encourages us to pursue and worship because Jesus is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of God's being (Heb. 1:3). In him, all the satisfying fullness of God can be found (Col. 1:19). He is God's word become visible (John 1:1-14). We need to pursue him, and the glory and beauty of God he reveals, because mere willpower is never enough or sufficient to combat idolatry; we need to replace our idols, we need to turn them in and exchange them back, replacing them with the only One who can truly satisfy our need for meaning and purpose and security, and that is Jesus. Jesus provides us with what our idol ultimately cannot. Through Jesus we are fully accepted and loved, through Jesus we have been given all the power and wisdom we need, through Jesus we can find true joy and justice and pleasure and beauty, through Jesus we have ultimate and eternal security.

So as we come to the table this morning, bringing ourselves forward as we bring our whole beings to God, I'd encourage you as you walk by the altar to lay down at the foot of the cross any idol that the Holy Spirit has moved you to recognize. Then, while you take into your body the bread and the cup, ask God to show you how this taste of Jesus can lead you to experience the ultimate thirst-quenching satisfaction that His Son provides.