

Idolatry

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).

The First Epistle of John ends with this imperative. Many commentators and expositors find it strange that John would conclude his letter with this, because it seems to them that he didn't discuss idolatry anywhere in the text. Yet, no conclusion to this letter could be more appropriate! Idolatry is false religion, and the three cycles of John's epistle deal entirely with false religion. If one doesn't believe the truth regarding Jesus, or if one doesn't live a righteous life by obeying God's commands, or if there's no love for others (these are the three components of each of the cycles) – this is false religion. So, idolatry.

We have the mistaken notion that idolatry is worshiping statues carved of wood or stone. That's wrong. We need to think carefully about idolatry because it's an extremely – *exceedingly* – serious matter to God.

The Old Testament is loaded with idolatry, both in the pagan Gentile nations as well as within the people of Israel. The people back then did indeed carve statues of wood or stone, but those were only physical representations of the gods that they were worshiping. [Those “gods” were real; they were demon-like, wicked, created supernatural beings with God-given authority.] They believed that the gods that they worshiped would inhabit or indwell those statues. It was thought that their god was actually present in that carved statue. This religious idea is Satan's counterfeit of what God did at Creation (Genesis 1) when he made a human being and then He breathed into that physical body the breath of life, so the person became a living being, the image of God. *We* are God's representatives on Earth; the carved statues are the evil gods' representatives on Earth. Idolatry is a Satanic counterfeit of true religion, which is the worship of the Creator God. Some pagan worship involved not carved statues but mountains, or forests or springs or certain animals or heavenly bodies, something that God had created, because they supposed that some deity (a “god”) inhabited them. That's idolatry too. But idolatry is much more.

Paul states this in Romans 1: **“They became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images . . . They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator”** (vv. 23, 25). Let's unpack all that's here. God's creation is suffused with His holiness and His values. The physical world is not like a machine, something that humans make and that runs apart from them. The cosmos has God's worldview embedded in it. His entire creation reflects His goodness, His Person, and His glory. God stamped His name on everything He made. We're guests in His house, and in His house, we are to dwell by His values and rules and ideals. He knows everything that happens everywhere, even our thoughts and motives, and His creation is totally under His immediate direct supervision and control. Any view other than this makes God out to be a Deist-type of god. So we're therefore not free to hold views of *anything* that aren't theistic. Our thoughts, values, ideals, passions, etc are to be those of our Creator God, because anything less – that is, anything we imagine or think up – impugns or demeans God. It exchanges the truth of God for something else, something man-made, something that's not truth. Or something inspired by the Serpent.

Loyalty to God is holding to His values and to His understanding of everything. Anything less is idolatry. Any worldview, any understanding of society, of humanity, of male/female relationships, of marriage, of evil, of spiritual matters, or of *anything*, that isn't God's is idolatry. Why? Because it comes from some other “god,” not from our Creator God. That other “god” might be ourselves, our sinful thoughts and imagination, or it might be from created, supernatural, evil beings. Notice Paul's understanding of idolatry: **“Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. . . That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but that the things which they sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to become sharers with demons. You are not able to drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You are not able to share the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or are we attempting to provoke the Lord to jealousy?”** (1 Corinthians 10:14-21). For Paul, the pagan gods were demons. Idolatry is demonic.

Because of our sin nature, God is not in all our thoughts. We compartmentalize God, we put Him into a box that we open at appropriate times (think Sunday mornings in American churches!), if we even think of Him at all. So we make up values and ideas and stories and religions. And these all have a tremendously powerful appeal. So we suppose, for example, that we are autonomous, and that nature too is autonomous and self-sustaining. Our minds are so contaminated by sin, we can't think clearly about the physical world, or about spiritual matters, or about what we should love, or about anything. So we generate all kinds of phony narratives (fictions, lies), and we believe them. Our cultural values are all godless. Our views of economics and of government are godless as are our concepts of social and personal relationships. It's all idolatry. Idolatry isn't just the worship of false gods. It's worship that's not of God in truth.

The first three of the Ten Commandments and the “First and greatest commandment” in the New Testament deal with idolatry. “No other gods!” and loving God with “all our heart, soul and might” mean that God is to be worshiped in truth, that is, as He truly is, worthy of our total loyalty and love. He deserves no less. Now, why is this? Because we were created in the first place for this purpose: to be blessed by knowing and experiencing the infinite and totally glorious God. And as we live reflecting His glory, we glorify Him. If we’re not interested in knowing God in all His glory, then we have no reason even to exist. In love, however, God allows us to go on, but with these Scriptural appeals to know Him and, by eschewing idolatry, to enter into the relationship and set of responsibilities for which we were created.

Worldliness is akin to idolatry. The “world” consists of everything that the Serpent has introduced into human society and culture, indeed, insidiously into our lives, that opposes God. It’s a system yet it’s more; it’s *everything* that effectively appeals to sinful man. It includes ungodly thoughts, passions, ideas and beliefs, and even the will to ignore God. In other words, what’s worldly doesn’t have to be flagrantly opposed to God, it can be anything that isn’t godly, that doesn’t reflect His goodness, or truth, or His glory. God despises worldliness as much as idolatry: **“Love not the world, neither the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever”** (1 John 2:15-17). Worldliness, like idolatry, attempts to steal from God the glory that is His, and to place humans in a path to judgment. It says that Satan’s worldview, his values and his ideas are more worthy and more true than those of God. Jesus overcame the world by living obediently to the Father, and then defying Rome’s authority (Satan’s authority: “I control you because I can put you to death”) by going to the cross and then rising from the dead.

If there’s a difference between “world” and “idolatry,” I suggest it’s this: idolatry is more inclusive. And it has more to do with ultimate matters, with what we’re devoted to. Idolatry is apostasy. It’s spiritual adultery, it’s loyalty to what’s evil. The “world” keeps us sensate, loving pleasures and earthly things. The world makes us want to be sophisticated and special. It keeps us secular and mundane. Worldliness keeps us from being godly. But there’s so much overlap that differentiating them is futile. Covetousness, for example, is both. Lust for power and wealth and love of self also could be in both categories. Both idolatry and worldliness involve commitment; they are not merely distractions.

Idolatry is heinous to God. In Ezekiel Chapter 9, God commanded idolaters in Jerusalem to be slain. Later, Ezekiel explains that their problem was their heart (14:3-5). David had personal failures, such as his sins with Bathsheba and Uriah, but he wasn’t an idolater. Solomon became an idolater because “his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God as the heart of David his father was.” Solomon’s failures, including idolatry, stemmed from his heart problem. Do we have a heart for God? Or not? Is there idolatry in the Church? If there’s no heart for God, there’s certainly idolatry. That’s because we were created to worship. We are all necessarily religious. If it’s not the Creator God in our hearts, whom we delight to experience and to serve, whom we love with all our being, then it’s some other god.

So, how do we keep ourselves from idols? How do we not love the world? John’s letter tells us three ways: by believing in Jesus the Jewish Messiah/King and by obeying Him, that is, by obeying the Law of Christ (which is everything He told us we’re to do in the Gospel narratives and thru the writings of the Apostles), and by living righteous lives, that is, as God instructed in the Scriptures how it’s to be lived. Because in these ways, we exalt Christ and we honor the Father. We fulfill our creation purpose of glorifying God. We therefore need to know Scripture! And we need to will to live it.

We must believe in Christ Jesus is first because that’s how we’re born again. We have a new life and a new heart, one that loves God and loves others. This “belief” is one that obeys Christ, for **“We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did”** (1 John 2:3-6). It’s a belief that sanctifies (3:6,9). It’s a belief that loves our brothers in Christ (3:14). And it’s a belief that eschews idols (5:21).

Let’s conclude. Idolatry isn’t some primitive religious practice from ancient times, or something ignorant people do in distant parts of the world. It’s something all humans do everywhere throughout all time. And America today is saturated with it. So is the church. Idolatry is the refusal to glorify God by attributing some aspect of God’s perfect Person and work in the world to some other being or thing, or substituting something we invent for what He’s revealed, thereby demeaning God. We who claim to be followers of Christ need to know God in all His infinite glory, that is, experience Him, reflect His glory, and serve Him with all our heart, mind and soul so that we avoid practicing idolatry. Because if we do, we dangerously offend the very One who in love sacrificed Himself to rescue us from deserved condemnation.