

The Anatomy of Contemporary Idolatry

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

1 Corinthians 10:14 – “My dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

Introduction

In an age of education, empirical research and intelligent investigation, why would we need to consider the subject of contemporary idolatry? Some might be tempted to ask, “*Haven’t we evolved beyond that?*” In this “*age of enlightenment*” it wouldn’t be an overstatement to assert that: Idolatry is the greatest sin that plagues the heart of man. Calvin expressed it well when he said that “*the human heart is an idol factory.*”

The sin of idolatry is near to us, dear to us, and in the very midst of us, so much so that we may hardly even be aware of its existence. One of the reasons that so many of us are not aware of this serious and pervasive problem is that we lack a clear understanding of 1) the nature of and 2) the need for idolatry.

I would like for us to consider the following six questions related to idolatry:

1. What is the true nature of idolatry?
2. What is the root cause of idolatry?
3. What forms does it take in the visible church and in contemporary culture?
4. What are some of the negative consequences of idolatry?
5. What is the positive alternative to this seminal sin? And,
6. What is the practical application of this important truth?

I. What Is The True Nature of Idolatry?

What is idolatry? “*Idolatry is wanting something else more than we desire God.*”

It is valuing something/someone in a way that hinders the love and trust that we owe to God. It is anything that conflicts with putting God first. When the Apostle Paul was exhorting the Corinthian Church in the first century, he was equally speaking to all of us in the 21st century when he said, “*My dear friends, flee from idolatry*” (1 Cor. 10:14). Idolatry is so serious and so deadly that it needs to be avoided like the

plague! Many of us are in serious spiritual danger and we don't even realize it. How sad is that?

In an age of tolerance, the Christian church has had relatively little to say about this serious sin. Perhaps more than any other sin, the truth about idolatry is one that needs to be told in our time. What is the truth about idolatry?

Idolatry is a worship in which the honor and glory due to God alone is given to someone or something other than the One true God. If we fail to give God His rightful place in our lives, we will have no alternative except to give that place to someone or something else, and that is idolatry. Idolatry may assume different forms in different centuries and different cultures but the true nature of idolatry remains the same. Whether we worship a wooden caving or whether we deify ourselves, the principle of idolatry is in reality the same. The honor that is due God is turned aside and given to someone/something which is not God. Whenever and wherever this is done, whether in heathen temples or Christian churches, there is an act of idolatry!

It's not necessary to formally deny the one true God in order to be an idolater. All that is necessary is that we desire something else more than we desire God. All that is necessary is that we relinquish the throne of our hearts to someone or thing other than God. We may not even be aware of it and in many cases we're not aware of it. Nonetheless, idolatry is a deadly sin that God has strongly denounced in His Word.

What did Jesus say? If we love anything/anyone more than Him, we are not worthy of Him. If we love anyone more than we love Christ we can't be His disciple. Idolatry isn't something confined to other times or other cultures, rather it is the most pervasive and deadly sin imaginable and it is here in our midst!

What does the "*man of sin*" do in 2 Thessalonians 2:4? He "*sets himself up in God's temple and proclaims himself to be God.*" If the truth be told, he isn't the only one who has committed the sin of self-deification. It's a sin that we all need to watch and continually pray against. This sin is so serious that two of the Ten Commandments are devoted to the prohibition of it (Ex. 20:3, 4). The besetting sin for all of us is, in one word, "*idolatry*".

It is not for nothing that Paul sternly commands the Corinthians to *flee from idolatry*. In Isaiah 42:8, the Lord says, "*I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.*"

II. What Is The Cause of Idolatry?

To a secular, superficial thinker, the perils of idolatry may seem very small to non-existent. Since man is incurably religious, the seeds of idolatry are within each of us. The secret roots of this sin reside in every human heart. The cause of idolatry is the natural corruption of the human heart. It's not surprising that Calvin said "*The human heart is an idol factory,*" because there's no end to the number of idols we are capable of producing. Almost anything or anyone can become a potential idol!

Our Adamic nature shows itself in a thousand different ways. Idolatry is an act of the sinful nature (a work of the flesh) – an act of the unregenerate human heart. It is

the great disease of which all the children of Adam are infected since birth.

Jesus said, *“For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’”* (Mark 7:21-3).

According to Paul in Galatians 5:19-21, *“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; IDOLATRY and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* Paul is saying that idolatry is the natural product of man’s heart. It’s a spiritual weed which is always ready to bring forth!

Man will worship something. If not God, then an idol! There is no third option. A distorted view of God and reality always characterizes the religion of the natural man (1 Cor. 2:12-14). God is a Spirit and natural man often craves after something he can see and touch. In the beginning God created man in His image and since then man has not ceased to return to compliment. Man brings his god down to his own level. Natural man allows his morality to determine his theology rather than the reverse. The song writer expressed his concern this way, *“Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the One I love, here’s my heart, Come take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.”* Because the seeds of idolatry are always present in the human heart, we need to heed Paul’s warning to *“Flee from idolatry”* (1 Cor. 10:14).

III. What Form Does Idolatry Take in The Visible Church?

The visible church (those who profess to be Christians) is opposed to the invisible church (those who are true believers) the elect of God. When Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church, He was talking about the invisible, not the visible church. Particular congregations and/or denominations of the visible church are not exempt from serious errors in faith and practice.

Paul says, *“You must not associate with anyone who is an idolater (1 Cor. 5:11); “Do not be idolaters, as some of them were” (1 Cor. 10:7); “Flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14); John says, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).* The sin of idolatry is a predictable and prevalent sin in the visible church. It was a problem in the first century, and it remains a problem in the 21st century.

What forms of idolatry present themselves to the visible church in our time?

- 1) Idolatry is to have images and pictures of saints that we venerate and revere.
- 2) Idolatry is to glorify and pray to the virgin Mary and the departed saints.
- 3) Idolatry is to bow down before mere material icons in the worship service.
- 4) Idolatry is to worship anything that man’s hands have made or invented.
- 5) Idolatry is to make mere men mediators of God’s covenant rather than Christ.
- 6) Idolatry is to look to the church rather than Christ for eternal salvation.

- 7) Idolatry is bowing down in homage before an image, picture or statue.
- 8) Idolatry is exalting and desiring the gift more than the giver of the gifts.
- 9) Idolatry is focusing on the self rather than on the Savior in worship.
- 10) Idolatry is valuing your money and materialism more than the Master.
- 11) Idolatry is putting your spouse or your children in the place of God.

IV. What Are Some of The Negative Consequences of Idolatry?

Be careful who or what you worship because you will become what you worship; you will become like the object or the one you worship. Everyone has an ultimate object of love and loyalty. What's most important to us determines what's very important to us. Our core values flow out of the ultimate object of our love and allegiance. The person you truly worship will control you. Even secular people realize this.

Have you ever heard someone say, "*She worships her husband*"? Such people are saying that they live for the one they worship. You don't have to be motivated or forced into it, it just naturally happens. Worshipping the wrong god guarantees we have wrong values, resulting in wrong decisions and actions.

Don't create and worship your own false god; spend your time getting to know the One and only true God (Ex. 20:3, 4). God won't compete with other gods. He won't share His glory with other gods or other things.

Do you remember the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when Indiana Jones' nemesis took the Idol away from Indiana Jones and the hostile natives were all around them and he held the Golden Idol over his head? Do you remember what happened next? All the natives fell down and knelt before the Golden Idol.

In America today, most people aren't likely to kneel down before the Golden Idol, but these are a few of the things we will kneel before: houses, cars, boats, sports, TV's, money, job, self, spouse and children.

It does matter what you believe in and what is the ultimate authority for our lives. It does matter who we worship and who is the ultimate object of our love and loyalty. Idolatry is a LIE that is destructive, dangerous, and ultimately, it's deadly. What's the LIE? The LIE is: *there is some ONE or some THING more important than the one true God.*

That LIE comes from the pit of hell and it smells like smoke!

If you want to see some of the negative consequences of idolatry, see Romans 1:21-32, where Paul lists 24 sins resulting from not giving God His proper place in our lives:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to

sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

The negative consequences that result from idolatry are too numerous to mention. But when we carry poison in our blood stream it affects every part of the body. When our god is the wrong god, our ultimate object of love and loyalty is wrong, our perspective or worldview is unrealistic, our core values are wrong, our feelings are often inappropriate, our thinking is confused, our heart is hard, our conscience is callous, our morals are corrupt, our relationships are unhealthy, our decisions are unwise and our actions are sinful. Whether we realize it or not, the sin of idolatry adversely affects every aspect of our being. Proverbs 14:12 says, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.*" Finally...

V. What Is The Positive Alternative to The Deadly Sin of Idolatry?

God is so unique, so special, so powerful and so awesome that to think of Him like anything or anyone else is wrong. Any idea we attach to any image of Him we have made in our minds isn't big enough to describe Him. To think of God in any form is to shortchange Him and is to rob Him of His divine attributes.

Do you have an image of God that you cling to when you think about Him? Is it accurate? There's a book written by J. B. Phillips called, *Your God Is Too Small*. It's a classic. I recommend it because it will help you evaluate your concept of God.

There are many misconceptions of God going around, but there are also many ways to describe His true nature, to be accurate when we talk about Him. God is a jealous God – He desires and deserves your affection and admiration. God is a jealous God and will not share His glory with another – not even you. God desires and deserves to be the sole object of our worship; He won't tolerate pretenders to His throne in our lives. This is so important that He warns of lasting consequences of infidelity to Him.

Idolatry can ruin generations and fidelity can bring great blessing to future generations (Ex. 20:5-6). "I, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the

fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” By far, the best picture of what God is like is found in the person of Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews says that “The Son perfectly mirrors God and is stamped with God’s nature” (Heb. 1:2-3, *The Message*). That means that when we read the Gospel, we learn what God is like by seeing what Jesus is like. When we study the life of Christ we’re seeing no less than the character, the essence, the image of God.

What is the positive alternative to the deadly sin of idolatry? It’s nothing less than: 1) giving our ultimate love and loyalty to the one true God, 2) honoring Him as God, 3) giving Him His rightful place in our lives, 4) worshipping Him in spirit and in truth, loving Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. The positive alternative is trusting, loving and serving the Lord. Doing His will, His way for His glory.

The positive alternative is giving God first place in our lives over anything and everything else! The antidote for idolatry is a personal, loving and intimate relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Only when we learn to love God properly, can we learn to enjoy all His gifts appropriately.

VI. What Is The Practical Application of This Truth?

A final question that we all need to ask is: “*What do we bow down to?*”

Every once in a while, get off the merry-go-round and ask yourself these questions:

1. What am I doing?
2. What should I be doing?
3. What should I be doing next?
4. What should I not be doing?

5. What persons or things do you have that you devote yourselves to more than to God?

Now it’s time to stop preaching and to start meddling:

Are you superstitious? Do you look to someone/something other than God for guidance on how to live your life? Do you even read, let alone consider, what your Horoscope says in the newspaper? Do you believe that something, like heavenly bodies, ultimately controls the universe?

Do you hold certain people like sports stars or entertainers or musicians or actors in high esteem – so high that they eclipse your desire for God? Or eclipse your need to look to godly people for your role models?

What do you think is the worse idol – the most prevalent idol – in our culture? Perhaps our most dangerous temptation lies in the idolization of the unholy trinity: me, myself and I. Our greatest danger is self-deification and the selfish pursuit of happiness.

Our happiness is not the ultimate goal in life. Do not make yourself an idol. We

make ourselves an idol when we put ourselves on the throne of our lives. We need to understand that things will not ultimately make us happy. To want to be happy is not wrong but to worship happiness is wrong.

How many marriages and families have been ruined because one person selfishly worshipped happiness, that is, because one person put his happiness above doing what he knew God wanted him to do?

The pursuit of happiness isn't a god worthy of our worship or a goal to be directly pursued. It's like chasing after the wind; it can't be caught. Rather, happiness is a by-product of being rightly related to God and bringing glory to God. Real happiness is found in living a life of holiness, devotion, worship and loving service to Jesus Christ.

Is it any wonder that the Apostle John's closing words in his first epistle were: "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21)?