

## What Is Always True About The World?

Keeping Ourselves From Idolatry

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Today, we face a world gone berserk! Randomly bring up any subject to a person in the world, and you will inevitably receive back a comment devoid of spiritual understanding, discernment, and wisdom. It just seems as though their solutions to problems are out there in left field somewhere.

Why is this so? The general reason is that they do not fear and reverence God; therefore, it is impossible for them to have the right perspective on anything.

**Job 28:28** "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding."

**Proverbs 1:7** "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction"

We know, and we have no doubt, that the fear of the Lord is the major factor in our lives for living with spiritual understanding, discernment, and wisdom. If the study of history—especially as we find it in the Bible—does nothing else for us, it should always give us a true perspective of our lives and the lives that we see in the world. When we look back across the story of the church and of the saints, we find that the world has often been as it is today.

In a sense, we are confronting nothing new; it has all happened before. God has given us the answers to all of life's questions, including the answers to our puzzlement and to our problems.

This is one of the proofs of the utter uniqueness of scripture. It does not matter at what period of history we live, nor what may be happening in the world around us. The situation, in the way of principles, has been anticipated and the solution provided for and dealt with somewhere in the Bible.

The theme of John's first epistle is our position as true Christians in the world. What do we know about the world? What is always true about it? What motivates it? How does Satan manipulate his kingdom? These are just a few questions at which we want to look today.

The apostle John, writing as an old man, was addressing members of God's Church who were in a very difficult world. He believed that it was important to caution them about their relationship with the world. He wanted to help us to realize and understand the great difference between the saints and the world. What does John tell us that we know?

**I John 5:19-21** We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

I John is a letter written to brethren who were in an extremely contrary and contradictory world. The aged John, knowing that his time was short, was anxious for the brethren to know against what to guard in such a conflicting world. We are in the same world as everybody else, and we are subject to the same things that they are. We do not live enchanted lives; we are all here in the fluctuating course of history. The question is, "Against what in the world do we need to guard?"

The message of the Bible is that there are certain great principles. If we truly understand these principles and apply them correctly, if we base and plan our life on them with the fear of the Lord, we can have the answers to life's problems. Therefore, in a crisis situation, the first thing we must do is to make sure that we properly understand the right application of God's principles. We have to know what we know and understand that we know it. In a crisis situation, the Bible usually does not immediately say, "Pray." It almost always first says, "Think!" However, how can we actually think about a problem that we have or a situation in which we are if we have not first learned what God's answer is in the Bible? We think, because we realize that we have to go to the Bible to find the answer.

The Bible instructs and admonishes us to understand the truth, to obey the commandments of God, and to apply the teachings and example of Jesus Christ. This is where we find the answers to life's problems.

The apostle John is realistic: he does not attempt to gloss over the problems, and he does not make light of them. He is one that gets right to the point. This is why he says in verse 21,

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**I John 5:21** Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

It is a very simple statement, and it seems out of place with the rest of the context of that portion of scripture—even with his epistle.

John and the rest of the biblical writers always face things as they are, even at their worst. The Bible has strength and power. It is concerned about faith, hope, and love. In terms of its own dealing with the truth, it looks at the world as it is, without mincing words, at its worst. This may sound depressing to some; if it does, maybe they are not accepting the inspired teaching of the Bible. To be realistic, it should not be depressing to those who think clearly and are not led by emotion but who are led by a very realistic book, the Bible. We, as God's church, must be realistic people.

The Bible's message looks at the facts, deals with them frankly and honestly, and applies its remedy very clearly. John says,

**John 5:19, 21** We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one? Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Here, we are reminded of three important things about our relationship with the world. First, we find something about ourselves: "We know that we are of God." Second, we are told that there are certain things that are always true about the world. Third, we are to keep ourselves from idolatry. There is a progression here.

The first thing the apostle John tells us about our relationship with the world is this great assurance that we have, that "*we know*."

I have mentioned this in at least my last two sermons, because it is a very important point. What I have observed in the church over the years is that people have come to the church and have "walked the walk," so to speak; they have "talked the talk." However, they really have not known what they believed. Whenever something came up that they did not understand they were easily distracted or enticed and moved into heresy quite often. Thus, being in God's church, it is very important that we know what we know.

One of the things that we have to know is that we are of God. That seems like an obvious statement. Many of these people whom we might call "tares" have not known that they were of God. They have not really internalized God's Word and lived His way

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of life, which is part of knowing that we are of God. We are not men and women who are hovering in the dark; we are not tossed to and fro; we are not clouds moved by the wind. We, as Christians, understand exactly where we stand on most of the issues and most of the doctrines of the Bible.

When life is smooth and easy, people talk of how exciting it is to investigate truth and to examine it. The nineteenth century was such a time, and today is such a time, as well. Some people think that this is all it means to be a Christian. They think that all we have to be Christians is to be seekers of information. They seek information from the Bible without applying it in their lives. Remember, the Gnostics were seekers. Being a seeker is not a qualification of a member of God's church. The Athenians, whom Paul lectured about their many gods and idols, were seekers.

People read literature and compare this and that, and they say how wonderful it is. Yet, they remain unsure. In a world like this present one, we have little or no time for such indulgences, things that answer no questions and provide no answers.

True Christians are people who are sure of what they believe because they have the truth revealed to them through the power of the Holy Spirit—the very mind of God in them. John writes in order that we may be absolutely sure. We start with the truth that we believe by faith. Then the truth is attacked and sometimes various things shake some Christians. However, these lessons are given to us to strengthen and establish us, to prompt us to prove all things.

The first thing the apostle John emphasized in his message is that there are certain things that we should know. We have ceased to be seekers and inquirers; we are men and women who have stopped doubting! The glory of God's truth is that it gives us knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. It is the revelation of God, and it gives that unique and definite authority. We should know exactly where we are and how we stand in relationship to this world. We should already have been freed and delivered out of the realm of situation ethics, of tentative conclusions, of "gray areas," and of politically correct compromise.

Mark these words: If we do not know where we stand in relationship to the world, God will test us to show us where we fall short. He wants us to know, and He wants to know Himself, where we stand. We must be sure about our commitment and devotion to God and His way of life. This does not mean that we are people who just pay our formal respect to God in public worship. We do try to live righteous lives. We do try to be benevolent to others. True Christians are all this and much more.

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We must know that we are of God. How do we know? You can go down some of the checklists in the Bible to get a good indication of whether or not you are of God. Repentance of past sins in humility is a requirement. Acceptance of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior is another requirement. Fully submerged water baptism; obedience to God's statutes and laws, especially the Ten Commandments; keeping the Holy days and the Sabbath; ongoing overcoming of sins; abstaining from the works of the flesh that are found in Galatians 5:19-21; production of the spiritual fruit of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; answered prayer; receiving of spiritual blessings—these are all indications of people who are of God.

Do not look to physical blessings as an indication that we are of God. Many who discarded God and left the church have acquired wealth. Physical blessings are not an indication of righteousness. Ancient Israel received physical blessings for obedience, but the church today receives spiritual blessings. That is not to say that God will not bless members of His church in physical ways; of course He does. We should be thankful to receive them. However, the primary blessings that we get as God's people are spiritual in nature.

We live in a society of vast wealth, thanks to the blessings God promised Abraham. Even the wicked of this society receive physical benefit from such wealth, and from those blessings that God promised to Abraham thousands of years ago. The real indications that we are of God are spiritual!

**I John 5:19** We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

By "we are of God," John means that we are begotten sons of God, and we have the Holy Spirit. We have been made a new creation. It is important to understand that an essential part of the New Testament message is that, if we are Christians, we are altogether different from those who are not. We know that we are of God because we see the fruit of the Holy Spirit working in us, as I mentioned.

I know that sometimes we do not see as much growth as we would like to see in our lives. Fruit takes a long time to grow before it is seen and appreciated. We do not just know we are of God; we must bear fruit worthy of repentance unlike the world.

**Matthew 3:1-8** In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at

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hand!" For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight.'" And John himself was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance."

It is interesting here that John the Baptist saw this bearing of "fruits worthy of repentance" as one of the major signs of whether or not a person was being converted or called. Unlike the Pharisees and Sadducees, we are spiritual children of God, related to God in that intimate sense, recipients of His very life and nature. The point is that we are unique, and we know whom we believe. Regarding this, Paul says:

**II Timothy 1:12** For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.

Paul refers to "the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me," and he says, "Christ lives in me." Paul also tells us that if we are "in Christ," then we are a "new creation." These terms are everywhere in the New Testament. When terms are mentioned everywhere in the Bible, then they are very important.

Do we know that we are of God—not in the mystic sense of the Gnostics, but in the sense that our faith has works and fruit? That makes our faith a living faith!

Christians are those who have been called out of, and delivered from, this evil world. We are those who have been called from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. We are aware, not only of the difference between us and the world that does not believe in Christ, but also of this difference between what we were before and what we are now. We can see a very vivid example of those who did not understand this, in what happened with the Worldwide Church of God. When the doctrines started to change, many of them went back to the Sunday-keeping churches that had doctrines that were contrary to God's, because they did not see any difference between themselves and the world.

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Though we are aware of the sins we have committed, we know—in spite of it all—that we are of God. God has had mercy on us and has worked in us a miracle of the new creation. True Christians are miracles of God, the fruit of His labor. If we know we are of God, we know and realize that we are walking and thinking miracles, because of God's spirit in us.

The second thing the apostle John tells us about our relationship with the world is that we know the truth about the world.

**I John 5:19** We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one.

The whole world lies under the power of the wicked one. It was not only an essential part of John's teaching but also of that of the other apostles and early Christians, as well. They drew this distinction between the church and the world, the absolute difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. The truth about the world, according to this teaching, is that the whole world lies under the dominion of Satan, in the grip of outright evil.

The New Testament teaching is that, however much the world may change on the surface, it is always under the control of evil and sin. This allows that the powers of evil can be modified a great deal, and they have been modified down through the ages. Satan's deceptions evolve only in the sense that they adjust to the pop culture of the day. He uses the same basic methods that have always worked effectively on human nature.

When we look back through human history, we find that there is a kind of clustering. There have been periods when the world has seemed to be getting better morally, but these have been followed by a terrible, overt plunge into degeneration. The whole time the world has been lying "under the sway of the wicked one." Regardless of how the world looks morally on the surface, Satan has still been there influencing it.

That is where we humans have been so consistently fooled. In the western hemisphere, during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for example, many people were confident that the world was becoming more moral, wiser, and better. People left the Worldwide Church of God in droves in search of the "better" life the world has to offer, but we cannot allow ourselves to be deluded by all of these changes that are merely superficial. The world, says John to these people, is under the influence of Satan and sin. It is in the grip of evil; it always has been; and it will be until the second coming of

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Jesus Christ.

Both John and Paul tell us something of the future of this world, and, of course, this is a vital part of our understanding of our relationship to the world. According to the New Testament, the world will always be the world; it will never get better by spiritual standards. Even if there were another period of apparent reform and improvement, the world will still be lying under the influence of the evil one, and the New Testament tells us that it will get worse and worse.

**II Timothy 3:13** But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.

The evil in the world is so essentially a part of it and its lifestyle that its final outlook will be judgment and destruction. Because the evil in the world cannot be taken out, the world will be destroyed. There will be an ultimate climax, and there will be a terrible end to it.

True Christians start with that view of the world. We are not fooled by it nor misled by it. The result of this is obvious: we have an entirely different view of the world from that of the people in the world. What is happening today—globalism, immorality, deception—is a confirmation of the New Testament teaching. We are not surprised at it; we do not expect anything different. The Republicans are not going to save us; neither are the Democrats.

The apostle John does not say we should reform the world, that we should set out to try to improve it. That is impossible for us. That is why Christ is coming a second time! John also does not suggest that we turn our backs on the world and withdraw from it completely.

He does say that it is our responsibility, as we live in this world, first and foremost, to make absolutely sure that the world does not come into our lives.

We must overcome our own sins first; then, perhaps, God will use us to tell the world. Most churches are under the false assumption that they can be a good witness to the world by preaching the gospel to the world, when they have ignored preparing individuals to be self-governed in God's way of life. No one can be a true witness of Christ and His teachings unless he has first learned self-control of his own thoughts and actions in humble submission to God.

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The third thing the apostle John tells us about our relationship with the world is that we are to keep ourselves from idolatry.

**I John 5:21** Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

John does not use a large number of words to express that point; he just states it emphatically. Human beings have, characteristically, lowered themselves to the worship of idols throughout their entire history. Because of the enmity against God, mankind has sought other forms of worship. The irony of idolatry is that, quite often, idols have human features that do not function, making them subhuman rather than the intended superhuman.

**Psalms 115:4-8** Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk; nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them.

We see the equivalence of the maker of idolatry with the idols themselves. People who make or worship them are stupid, senseless, and irrational. By doing this, they show that they are destitute of all the proper attributes of reason, since these gods cannot help them. It is very strange that the worshippers of idols do not see this. It is similarly strange that sinners do not see the foolishness in their acts of sin.

Idols come in all forms, not just tangible material images. The basis of all idolatry is that self-centered, rebellious human beings refuse to surrender themselves to the proper worship of the true God in the way that He commands. They do not understand how to worship God because they lack His Spirit. They fabricate images or representations to aid them in their worship of gods that they themselves have concocted.

Human nature tends to try to limit God to the confines of physical objects. In this way, human beings are able to package their gods in the image with which they feel most comfortable or that they can manipulate. The manipulation or control of the natural world is one of the enticements of modern witchcraft.

The First Commandment expresses that it is a sin to place anything at a higher value than God. Building upon the foundation of the First Commandment, the Second

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Commandment forbids the use of physical "aids" in worshipping the invisible God. By expanding the principle of the Second Commandment (forbidding idol worship) to include the principles of the First Commandment (having no other gods before the true God), we find that the Second Commandment is not limited merely to graven images of the type that the pagans used in past times and that the neo-pagans still use today in this society. In reality, any visually enticing or seductively pleasing thing can be an idol. Even intangible things that are inherently evil, such as demons, can be idolized.

Idols and pagan gods are parallel ideas and are even equated in Psalm 96:4-5 in a song of praise to God coming in judgment.

**Psalm 96:4-5** For the LORD is great and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.

The Israelites understood pagan gods to be idols, and in Egypt they sacrificed to demons, to gods they did not know, not to God. Because of this idols, and demons are commonly paired in scripture.

During the one-year period of the Day of the Lord, the sixth angel sounds the sixth trumpet, which is also the second woe. The sixth angel releases the four angels to kill a third of mankind with fire, smoke, and brimstone.

**Revelation 9:18-21** By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed—by the fire and the smoke and the brimstone which came out of their mouths. For their power is in their mouth and in their tails; for their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they do harm. [We have there a description of modern warfare.] But the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, that they should not worship demons, and idols of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood, which can neither see nor hear nor walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

What is implied by *idols* in verse 20 is things that are paid a degree of reverence, or idolatry. The Greek term from which *idols* is translated is *eidola*. In addition to the standard meanings—"image," "idol," "false god"—it retains the classical meaning "phantom of the dead" and "the demons that empower and inhabit the idol." We see that this is not just speaking about physical idols but also about the demons behind the idols

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that are really what is being worshipped. The idols mentioned here of gold, silver, brass, stone, and wood are extensions of that. They are modern inventions and can be anything from cars to items of warfare to homes—anything that we put before God. The Bible's condemnation of idols and idolatry is more far-reaching than just images. Paul sees a definite connection between idols and demons; he sees demons lurking behind idols.

**I Corinthians 10:14, 18-21** Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry? Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons.

The danger is not so much the idol itself—which can do nothing, think nothing, say nothing, and is inactive and dead—as it is the demon that is, in reality, receiving reverence in defiance of God. The importance of the connection between idols and demons is that, although a person may seem to be sacrificing to an idol, in truth, he is sacrificing to a demon, for which the Gentiles were known.

There is a great deceptiveness in idols. Because idols are helpless, useless gods, only the deceived worship them. When they do, they worship the deceiver. Simply stated, false gods make people false. It is the manifestation of a lie; therefore, it causes people to continue to live a lie. No one can live a lie and properly worship God, or follow Him, or live His way of life. Idolaters are grouped with liars; idol worship is lies that lead people astray. Those who engage in idolatry suppress the truth.

In II Kings 17, we see a description of the spiritual bankruptcy that characterized the spiritual condition of the northern tribes of Israel, at the time of King Hosea's reign, and their impending captivity by Assyria. They had reduced their god, in their own minds, to something they could control and call upon when it was convenient for them. Otherwise, they shoved their gods to the side.

**II Kings 17:13-18** Yet the LORD testified against Israel and against Judah, by all of His prophets, every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways, and keep My commandments and My statutes, according to all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by My servants the

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prophets." Nevertheless they would not hear, but stiffened their necks, like the necks of their fathers, who did not believe in the LOORD their God. And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the LOORD had charged them that they should not do like them. So they left all the commandments of the LOORD their God, made for themselves a molded image and two calves, made a wooden image and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LOORD, to provoke Him to anger. Therefore the LOORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone.

To be removed from God's sight is the most terrifying of thoughts for someone who has been following God. To be cut off from God, a state caused by sin, gives a person completely over to the doctrines of demons. Characteristically, Israel's two main national sins were idolatry and Sabbath-breaking. However, by the time of Hosea's reign, the Israelites were doing much worse. They were sacrificing their children in the fire to Baal. That is what verse 16 means by "served Baal." It means that they were sacrificing their children and other members of their society in human sacrifices to the god Baal, who was also related to fertility, as was the god Molech. The Israelites "borrowed" the most perverted of the gods from the surrounding Gentile nations. They so desired to be like the other nations and were so inclined to look for new things to titillate the lust of their eyes that they absorbed everything foreign.

The picture is the same today, in this nation, as the descendants of these very same people are so inclined with the same exact tendencies to sin. The modern day Israelites are gluttonous for perversions. Ancient Israel murdered their children by sacrificing them to ancient gods of sex; today, the descendants of ancient Israel in America, Canada, Australia, Britain, the Netherlands, France, and throughout the world murder their children by sacrificing them to the modern gods of sex, by abortion. "Therefore the LOORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight." Many Israelites were killed, and those who were not were carried off into captivity as slaves to serve the cruel Gentiles. This will happen again according to biblical prophecy.

The paradoxical nature of idols persists. A simple piece of metal (cars and trucks) or item of wood and stone (houses and buildings) becomes an object of evil idolatrous

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thoughts. Idolatry is not confined to just the material that we see. Idols are not only things made by man's hands that are posed or set up as idols but also those things that dominate our thoughts. According to Webster's *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* an idol is "any object of ardent or excessive devotion or admiration." It is interesting that Webster's dictionary says nothing in this definition of its being an actual image of something to worship. This was separated, and I thought that it was interesting: "Any object of ardent or excessive devotion or admiration."

We find that a great danger lies in wait behind idolizing anything. Even another person or group can be idolized. This type of idolatry can have an impact on later generations. Take for example, the big hit TV show "American Idol," which intentionally makes a star-idol out of amateur vocalists and entertainers. The show is appropriately named. Some people just cannot miss this show and they follow "their" star all the way to the end; it dominates everything.

Frank Sinatra was idolized as a "heartthrob" singer/actor in the middle part of the last century. He was known for his immoral life style and music. Even today, most people have heard of his hit song "Strangers in The Night," about two unmarried immoral people who meet for the first time one evening and end up having sex together the same night. There is also his defiant song "I Did It My Way!" with reference to no one telling him what to do. He certainly was not going to obey God. Songs such as these, from entertainment idols, have been influencing several generations since the time they were first performed. We see a world that is, in a general description, immoral, to say the least.

The same holds true for Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Madonna, and hundreds of other idolized entertainers in niche markets who have influenced impressionable children. The number of entertainment idols is uncountable in this country today. It is ironic that the worst immoral dregs of society are having the greatest influence on this civilization, on this world. This is why we know that we are of God and that the world lies in the influence of the wicked one. We must know this so that we are not deceived.

Hip-hop is well known for its perversions yet parents allow their children to listen to it. Of course, a true Christian has no justification in allowing his child to listen to such anti-social, anti-moral, anti-Christian music. What are the children being encouraged to do? They are being raised to be good little idolaters, to say the least. That is the result of this nation's way of life, of the world and this society. Does it matter if we associate with idolaters? Paul minces no words in warning the church about not allowing flagrant sin to continue in the congregation. In I Corinthians 5, we will pull out a principle that applies to this very situation.

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On the other hand, those who work in the world must work with worldly people, who commit all sorts of perversions. Although we may work with such worldly people, we should not socialize with them. We saw what happened to the Israelites when they socialized for generations with the pagan nations: They ended up murdering their own children. Because of the godless influence of the pagans, they reached the very depth of immorality and decadence. What about within the church?

**I Corinthians 5:9-11** I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.

We see there that it is very important that a person who is habitually doing such things be removed from the congregation. It is not talking about those who sin occasionally and then repent but those who flagrantly live a sinful way of life. Children learn by example. If their parents set the example that physical objects have too much importance, then the children will absorb and pass on the same values.

When we socialize with idolaters, we share in their ways. We may also share their idols, if we are not careful. Some in the world are obsessed with their local sports team. They have all the latest souvenirs for their much-loved race car driver or their favorite sports team. The indication that something may be an idol is in the word *obsession*. To be obsessed is to be idolatrous! We certainly want to avoid obsession of things. I have known some men who have cried when their team lost. Maybe it was because they lost so much money on their bet, but I do not think so! I felt like saying to them, "Grow up!"

If we obey the dictates of a person, our family, our church, or some other group contrary to the commands and principles of God, we are guilty of idolatry. The individual or group becomes the object of idolatry, replacing God's influence and usurping His authority. This principle applies to both the First and Second commandments. The Bible reserves some of its strongest language for idolatry. It speaks of it as abhorrent, detestable, something that provokes, something that is disobedient, and something that shows stubbornness.

**I Samuel 15:23** For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.

The prophets characterized idolatry as a pigheaded, willful disobedience of God's law and even of natural laws—the kind of disobedience that would not occur to dumb animals. This is implying that idol-worshipping humans are worse than beasts in their understanding.

The most common, and well-developed metaphor, refers to idolatry as sexual impurity. Sexual excess is a form of idolatry. Keep in mind the word *obsession*. Just as sexual purity was a religious mandate under the prophets, idolatry made the opposite claim. Fertility cults encouraged, instead, the flaunting of human sexuality as a means of ensuring the fruitfulness of the earth through sympathetic magic.

Historically, idols represented nature gods, fertility gods and goddesses (the Baals and Asherah), and had long associations with fertility cults and their practices, practices believed necessary to ensure successful grain and livestock production. The rites prescribed ritualized prostitution, both female and male; incestuous relations; and the sharing of one woman by several generations of men. All of these perversions are mentioned as part of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. The stone idol or wooden pillar, with its phallic symbolism, seems to have been viewed as the mystical sire of resulting offspring or even of the people themselves. This nation has its very own obelisks, the largest of which is the Washington Monument, a symbol of this nation's deep roots in paganism and its fertility rites. This same phallic symbol is mounted atop the mainstream Christian churches of many of the modern nations of the descendants of ancient Israel. Without realizing it, they flaunt their deep pagan roots in the name of Christ.

**Jeremiah 2:27** "Saying to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave birth to me.' For they have turned their back to Me, and not their face. But in the time of their trouble they will say, 'Arise and save us.'"

In a similar religious climate, the prophets found in the image of an unfaithful wife an obvious analogy for a nation abandoning its own God for that of another people. Shameless and wild, she breaks covenant and betrothal, defiles herself with idols, and commits adultery with stone and wood. The prophets even dared to characterize Israel as a religious nymphomaniac. In this context, God is a "jealous God" and refuses to share His praise with idols. Idolatry and sexual immorality continue, hand in hand, in the New Testament, where idolatry appears in lists of sins that include several labels for illicit acts. Peter gives a list based on his observation of the will of the Gentiles. Peter is

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warning the people to leave their past life that was so heavily steeped in the will of the Gentiles.

**I Peter 4:3** For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles—when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries.

While idolatry is clearly a code name for violation of purity laws, especially but not only sexual ones, it eventually comes to designate lawless living in general. All of these that Paul lists are idolatries: the lewdness, the lusts, the drunkenness, the revelries, and the drinking parties. Ultimately, any violation of God's law is idolatry, and idols may serve as an image and label for all that is anti-Christ.

**I John 5:21** Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

I keep reading this because it is such a simple yet powerful statement that I want it to stick in our minds. John's exhortation "keep yourselves from idols" seems out of place, at first glance, compared to the rest of the epistle. Idolatry has not so much as been mentioned in the epistle. Although the warning may include a general admonition to avoid any contact with paganism, it is more likely that the warning represents a final characterization of the heresy represented by the false teachers.

The Greek word for *idols* here is used frequently in the literature of the period to refer to "false gods." We know that false teachers promote false gods. There is no way a man-made image, or someone who makes up one, can truthfully represent the Eternal God. Yet, false teachers arise, deceiving whomever they can deceive. The worshipping of an idol is such foolishness and promotes such a lie that one has to wonder what an idolater is thinking.

**Habakkuk 2:18-19** What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, a teacher of lies, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols? Woe to him who says to wood, "Awake!" to silent stone, "Arise! It shall teach!" Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, yet in it there is no breath at all.

False teaching is ultimately apostasy from the true faith. To follow after it is to become nothing better than an idol worshipper, especially if it is a matter of the truth of one's

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conception of God. Because of the seriousness of idolatry and the commonality of the tendency toward it, in I John 5:21, John says, "keep yourselves from idols." He is blunt with his admonition because he is driving home this point.

Just as there were false teachers promoting idolatry in ancient Israel, so also says Peter that there are false teachers now trying to deceive the Saints.

**II Peter 2:1-3** But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber.

The false teachers do not uphold the proper worship of the true God, made known in His Son, Jesus Christ. They promote a false god, an idol that they themselves have invented. They created their own god in their own image, an image with which they feel comfortable. Using their own standard of righteousness, they make a god out of their own human reasoning from which they develop their own religion. They fashion a false god into something that they believe that they can control and call upon when convenient for them. We see this happening very often with these individuals who flow through the church or who are associated with the church, who come up with their own specific doctrines around which they get others to rally. The Bible talks about gullible women being deceived by these very men and carried away into their beliefs. This is idolatry. The false teachers are being idolatrous, as are those who are following them. They have placed those pet doctrines as more important than God, and they have become obsessed with them. We know that obsessions, if not equal to idolatry, at least lead to them.

False teachers entice people with deceptive words, which in turn cause their victims to covet what they have. It may be knowledge; it may be false scriptural interpretation; it may be personality; it may be the promise of healing. Whatever is overly desired can be an object of idolatry. Covetousness grabs the attention and affection that belongs to God and is, therefore, idolatry. Of all base passions, this is the one that may most dethrone God from the human mind.

**Colossians 3:5-7** Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness,

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which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

This was the way you once walked, when you lived in the world and socialized with the world. Covetousness is idolatry, by the Bible's own definition. Covetousness is greediness, rapacity, and disregard of the rights of others. It is the arrogant and ruthless assumption that all other persons and things exist for our own benefit. Covetousness is a strong desire for and a seeking after material things. These material things become the objects of our worship, if we hold them as more important than God. Someone else's house or car can be an idol, if we want them covetously. This attitude is identified with idolatry because it replaces God with self-interest and obsession with visible things. Since an idol is an object of adoration, one who is covetous becomes an idolater and any earthly desires—sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed—become idolatry.

**Ephesians 5:5-7** 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. Therefore do not be partakers with them.

This idolater bestows on money the affections due to God. Worshiping money is as real idolatry as worshiping a block of stone. If this is so, this world is far more idolatrous than we realize! In addition, what may be the impact on the church itself, if that is the case? If the world is so idolatrous and we constantly are fighting against the world and the influence of Satan, how much has it really influenced us in this society?

Since every covetous person will be excluded from the kingdom of God, how anxious should we be to examine ourselves, to find out whether this sin exists in our own lives? What is the fate of idolaters? Every one of these sins, these fleshly works, has idolatry as its base because it is rebellion against God and is valued as more important than God. Idolaters will not inherit the Kingdom of God. They will be cast into the lake of fire for commandment-breaking if they do not repent.

**I Corinthians 6:9-10** Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor

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drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

Most of these sins are idolatrous.

**Revelation 21:8** But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

We know that this second death is the final death for defiant sinners. Most of these items in this list are idolatry, as well. It is obvious that God wants us to worship Him in spirit and in truth, rather than through the lie of idolatry. Liars are those who are false toward God and false toward man. For a person to look to something godless and powerless as more important than God, or even as important as God, defies all godly knowledge and wisdom. The idolater obviously has no true fear of God. We know that, if we are Christians, we must have the true fear of God.

The world looks to physical objects in a superstitious way, objects such as good luck charms, religious crosses, shrines. We observe a fact about this commercialized society in which we live: Those who sell idols care only for the monetary profit in them, as they did in the days of the apostles.

God calls us into His own spiritual presence to worship Him directly. Whenever we stop short of our face-to-face relationship with and worship of our Sovereign God by placing an object of desire before Him, we break the Second Commandment. God looks to those who come before Him in humility and respectful fear, and He despises those who have chosen their own objects of worship to place before Him.

Please remember that the wise old apostle John reminds us, in I John 5:19-21, of three important things with regard to our relationship with the world: We know that we are of God; there are certain things that are always true about the world; and we are to keep ourselves from idolatry. Because of the heavy influence of the world coming into our homes from all directions, we have a tough job ahead of us. We should have already been working on this, continuing to stand firm against the idolatrous bombardment of the world itself.