

## The First Commandment: Idolatry

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A very interesting thing occurred in the last week or so. If you will recall, last Sabbath Martin Collins spoke on idolatry. He did not know it, but John Reid was going to give a Bible study that very day in Denver, and we found out that *he* had prepared his Bible study on idolatry. Neither one of those two men knew that I had already prepared the sermon that I am going to give today, and it *also* is on idolatry. I think I have mentioned to you in the past that when something like this occurs, it makes one wonder who is behind this sudden interest that we all have in idolatry.

I know that I can say to you personally that the subject arouses my curiosity because I feel that it is of such supreme importance to all of us. I think understanding of this refinement is so that I can be aware on my own behalf, because I do not want anything to come between God and me.

I think that you are aware that five of the Ten Commandments directly deal with idolatry. The first four define our relationship with God, and the tenth as well, because Paul says in Colossians 3: 5 that covetousness *is* idolatry. No other sin, as far as I know, that I am aware of, deals with this one subject so directly. I think it can be truthfully said that because of this it is the most frequently committed sin, and the breaking of the first commandment especially leads to all others. You might ask *why*. It is because it is pride and concern about the self that triggers this most common and serious of all sin. It leads to the breaking of all of the others.

I want you to turn with me to Romans 14: 22-23, because I am going to approach this subject a bit differently than either of those men did. I am pretty sure of that.

Romans 14:22-23 Have you faith? Have it to yourself before God.  
Happy is he that condemns not himself in that thing which he allows.  
And he that doubts is damned [or condemned] if he eat, [Eating was part of the subject of the chapter.] because he eats not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

What Paul is dealing with here is a clash of conscience, a clash of values within any individual who is faced with making decisions, that he is unsure as to what is really right and what is really wrong. In other words, there is within this person two distinctly different morals or ethical alternatives. What does it produce? It produces puzzlement, and in some cases it produces fear, and it leaves one conscience-stricken. It makes a person feel uneasy about what he is permitting himself to do.

I think you will agree with me when I tell you right now that there is a massive clash of values going on all over the world. I do not know if there is any people on earth that are as aware of

this as those in the British Commonwealth and those who are in the United States of America.

The Islamics do not have a clash of values over murdering other people, or about giving up their lives, as it were, so that they would have the blessing of being able to kill others—kill innocent bystanders. So they blow themselves to pieces. There is no clash of values there. The Islamics do not worry about that kind of thing because they have been taught from their childhood that it is their responsibility before Alah to kill those they consider to be heretic or unbelievers, or whatever it is. There is no clash of values here. You would hardly find an American or a British citizen who would be able to do that kind of a thing because *of their* religious background.

This leads then to a critical question. What is the source of what you permit yourself to do? Where do your values come from? Who is the author of those values, and why do you have those values? Where did your values come from? Where were they formed? Are you sure that you are right, even though you are not conscience-stricken? The Islamic thinks he is right, and he is not conscience-stricken at all. We know very well he is not right, that he can do something evil and it never bothers his mind whatever.

We have to ask that last question because others, even we brethren, can do things that are absolutely wrong and never give a serious thought that we are doing something wrong. Is that not true? Before you were converted, you kept Sunday, and it never gave your mind a bit of worry that you were keeping that day. You did the same thing with Christmas, and Easter, and with all those others as well.

What I am talking about here is that these things impact on every area of life: business, education, entertainment, athletics, fashion, diet, child-rearing, husband and wife relationship, and one's relationship in one's community, and with neighbors. In other words, this principle that I am talking about here today is impacting on the entire framework of life. I mean not just in the broadest and most obvious areas of ethics and morals, but in the finite particular of life.

I want you to turn with me to Acts 9:2.

Acts 9:2 And [Paul] desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of *this way* [meaning Christianity], whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem.

Acts 18:25 This man [referring to Apollos] was instructed in *the way* of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spoke and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John.

Christianity is a way of life. It is a course of conduct encompassing every aspect of life. In 1983 Mr. Armstrong gave a sermon on the source or origin of law. Laws establish acceptable standards and provide for penalty within a community. In that sermon he stated, "That base, or body of beliefs, from which you operate is *your* system of morality and ethics." That system of morality is also a system of laws and values. They are standards you have accumulated most assuredly, at the very least, up until the time that you were called.

So where did yours come from? Notice again that I said "yours," because that particular system of laws and standards is yours. Now part and pieces of it have been absorbed from others in the environment in which you grew up—primarily your parents, the church you attended, and friends, to be sure; but whether accidentally, passively, or perfectly, you have made it yours through the choices that you have made in life. Your system is probably not exactly in every detail like anybody else's.

Any system of ethics and morality is by definition an expression of religion, because a religion, again by definition, is a way of life containing some measure of worship, and worship is merely a respectful response to one's god. It does not even have to be involved in being down on your knees or praying. Worship is a response to your god.

We are going to go to Proverbs 15: 25. In listening to the radio broadcast, I must have heard Herbert Armstrong say this scripture hundreds of times, but it contains a principle within it that is important to understand.

Proverbs 16:25 There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.

The term "way" here can be understood as a narrow, single issue that is involving one particular set of circumstances, or it can also apply to an entire package of values within one's code of conduct. The point in the proverb is that mankind is frequently driven by blind self-deception, having no real certainty regarding right and wrong; but it seems right to the person that is doing it. That is what the proverb is telling us. Why does it seem right? Because usually we just grew up with it, and we accept it, just like this thing of keeping Sunday, and Easter, and Christmas. And on an on it goes, and until something comes along that challenges it, it is ours, and we believe it, and we practice it. You see, there is a way that seems right, but the end thereof is the way of death.

Now how does *your way* stack up against *God's way*? This is really a fair question, because since our calling we have had the opportunity to make a fair assessment because we are no longer blinded to much of God's way. We do not know it perfectly, but now the blindfold has been removed, the veil is out of the way, and we begin to see that there are many things in our life that need to be altered, adjusted, changed completely, refined, or whatever, because we are now receiving part of the way, bit by bit, that has a far different source from that in which, in most cases, we grew up.

In one sense God is calling us out. He is challenging us here to either defend our body of beliefs and practices, or to drop them and change to His. He is warning us in advance through this proverb that our way of life, not His, has a pretty good chance of killing us.

The reason that any system of morality is an expression of religion is because it concerns itself with values, and the way one lives, even as God's does. It is just a parallel. The only difference is the source is human, but they parallel one another. The overall major difference is that His way works, and it produces life. Our way is a mixture of good and evil, but because the values are usually predominately bad it is going to produce death unless the way is changed.

Do you understand that because these principles are true—this reality, this true fact—each one of us, technically, is the god of our system. It is ours, and that our way of life is in opposition to God. I can say that confidently, because it is here in the Bible. Romans 8: 7 says that the carnal mind is enmity against God. It is not subject to God, neither indeed can be. It is an impossibility. That is why it is going to produce death unless some changes are made.

Law therefore is an acted, codified morality. Whether it is God's, or man's, by definition, it matters not. The difference lies in what they produce. Now this ought to be an easy question to answer. What has man's produced on earth? Man's has produced confusion, warfare, constant competition, pain from all the collision of values going on on earth, and ultimately death. We need a stronger testimony than the one that comes from the history of mankind, with each person, each nation operating on its own standards, on its own values.

We are going to go to Romans 3: 20 and we will see stated in three slightly different ways the same basic principle.

Romans 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

God's law is a set of standards, of values, ideas, and these are guides for behavior, for conduct, for attitudes, and when we break those laws, it tells us what sin is.

Romans 4:15 Because the law works wrath: for where no law is, there is no transgression.

If there is no standard set by God, then you are not breaking His law, and therefore there is no sin. But it tells you again what law does. It is a guide that sets standards.

Romans 7:7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? [No. It is a collection of values. It is a guide.] God forbid. No, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shall not covet.

What I just read here is a general principle and covers not just biblical morality, but also secular as well. Laws, whether they are God's or man's, show us our duty. In reference to God, law awakens us to a consciousness of sin. In other words, we have missed the mark. We have not lived up to the ideal that He provides. But it is through God's law that we become aware of the contrast between what we do and what we *ought* to do in relation to Him and to His government.

Our legislature enacts laws, and therefore is telling us what is moral and right and good in a particular secular area of life. An act of legislation covers something in a particular circumstance, but instead of calling the transgression of the state's laws sin, they call it crime. In almost every state, at least here in our Israelitish country, most crimes *are* sin. Not all of them, but breaking state laws also has the tendency to carry with it also breaking God's laws as well. The difference between secular law and God's law is that God's law contains clear spiritual

values, and shows us what our duty is to our Creator. So again, the question. Where do people get their ideas regarding what is moral?

Here is a logical conclusion to this rather long introduction. The conclusion is that religion, law, state, and morality are each part of the same family. They are all part of the same coin; therefore, every system of law is a system of ethics and morality, and since law establishes standards of conduct, those standards are the establishment of a religion. This has a very interesting affect, especially to America, and that is this: that because of this truth, in reality, there can be no separation between church and state. It is impossible.

This is a point that escapes most Americans, but not every American, because I have read articles written by American journalists who have clearly identified Communism and Fascism as religion. And they are, but they overlook the fact that these Republican forms of government that we have in Israelitish countries are *also* religion. The reason they say that Communism and Fascism are religion is because they can clearly see that the government is god in that system.

I want to give you a really clear example. At the height of the Roman Empire, the Romans made no bones about their belief that Caesar was god. Did not the people have to declare their loyalty to Caesar, and bow down before a statue of him? Now do not think that this day is over. I mean the day of calling the emperor or the king or the governor god. They went right out and declared that Caesar was god, and people had to declare their loyalty to him under the penalty of death. Sometimes people refer to this operation as part of the divine right of kings. Now be aware, because it is going to happen again.

Revelation 13:11-12 And I beheld another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spoke as a dragon. And he exercises all the power of the first beast before him, and causes the earth and them which dwell therein to worship the first beast, whose deadly wound was healed.

When the Beast arises, he will be publicly accorded the same honor that was given to the Caesar—an honor that should only be given to God, our Creator.

Revelation 13:15 And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed.

They will be killed because they will not give their loyalty to the Beast.

This long introduction I have given you is not untrue. Human government is a religious organization. It may not practice the same things as God demands in Christianity, but it is still following exactly the same principle. God makes laws, and He lays them down before His people, and He demands loyalty to Him, you see, in a perfect set of laws in a perfect situation.

Man comes along and imitates it. He is paralleling what is set by God, but instead of the loyalty going to God, the loyalty goes to the government. Whether it is a democracy, whether it is a

Republic, whether it is Communism or Fascism, it is still, at least tenuously, the worship of the state. That is idolatry, because that government and that man is establishing the standard for a way of life, and by his authority imposes it upon the people under the threat of death. Now God does not do that, because He patiently and mercifully gives us a great deal of time to conform ourselves to His standards.

In the Western world a new religion is rising, and it has been rising for several generations. It really is not new, but it indeed does have a new name. It was not called this new name when it began, but journalists have labeled it. It is called "secularism." It has been evermore strongly challenging this world's Christianity, really noticeably over the past 75 years or so. It has been gaining ever more strength in numbers and devotion in the United States of America, and the war between it and this world's Christianity is virtually over; Christianity is rapidly becoming irrelevant.

You know very well that persecution in the secular courts is already an established fact. Outright persecution on the streets cannot be very many years away. It has already worked its way into entertainment when anything Christian is derided and changed and abused and persecuted. In the media the same thing is happening, and in the schools where they are teaching the values of this world's secularism, not even this world's Christianity. I will tell you it is probably worst of all in the universities, for they can teach the teachers.

God is speaking:

Ezekiel 20:23-26 I lifted up my hand unto them [Israel]also in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen, and disperse them through the countries; Because they had not executed *my* judgments, but had despised *my* statutes, and had polluted *my* sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols. Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live; and I polluted them in their own gifts, in that they caused to pass through the fire all that opens the womb, that I might make them desolate, to the end that they might know that I am the LORD.

This series of verses is a critical point regarding why Israel was taken into captivity. There is no doubt that Israel was a religious people, but notice the emphasis on the personal pronoun "My," especially in verse 24. They paid attention to the religion that they themselves were attracted to, but it was not God's law. It was not God's standard. It was Baal's, and Molech's standard. The source of any given value or moral standard, that one uses as one's own, is going to go a long way toward identifying one's god.

We are going to go back to the New Testament and look at Romans 6:1, and verses 16-19.

Romans 6:1-2 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid [or certainly not].

Can you see why? If we sin, we are just telling God that He is not our God. It is that plain. It is idolatry regardless of what the sin is, because that is where the standards of Christianity have their source. It is from the Creator. No wonder Paul said, "Certainly not!"

Romans 6:16-19 Know you not, that to whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his slaves [it says right in the margin] you are to whom you obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that you were the slaves of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, you became the slaves of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as you have yielded your members slaves to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; [That is, from one to the other.] even so now yield your members slaves to righteousness unto holiness.

The source of the values to which one submits will also determine, in the biblical sense, who is sovereign in that one's life, and who that one is the slave of. The source also determines whether there is idolatry, and it determines how the conscience will respond. If the source is man, then man is the sovereign. This is just elementary-school logic. This can be okay to some extent if the value that one obeys is in agreement with God's value.

Any given person's values may come from society in general, or from one's family practices, or one's views, or even from one's spouse. I mention these things because one of the major justifications we give ourselves for sin, or for whatever we are doing, is that everybody else is doing it. That does not justify us before God. It will not work, because He is not fooled.

Do you understand what I am getting at? It is each person's responsibility to obey God regardless of whatever other people are doing, and the one to whom we give obedience to is showing who our god really is. If everybody else is doing it, and we join in with them, we are worshipping the same god that they are, which is probably the god of this world. So understanding the source-aspect of this subject helps determine, helps reveal the sin of idolatry in clear, but disgusting light.

The Israelites are shown in Ezekiel 20 that they apparently could, in all sincerity and with a clear conscience, and perhaps even with some degree of fervency, sacrifice their first-born child to Molech. It is pretty disgusting, is it not? It may turn our stomachs, but these are our ancestors, and God put it in the book so that we would understand that we are capable of the same thing. I will tell you, brethren, we ought to thank Him very often that we were born and reared in the United States or Great Britain where there was a pretty good measure of right values, because God made sure that He started the nations off on the right foot, and that they could never come back and say, "But You didn't tell us." Oh yes He did!

Listen here to Luke 14: 26-27 as Jesus lays down the law. Virtually every time that we baptize somebody, we go through this so that the person who is baptized will never be able to come back at God, or the ministry, or the church, and say, "Hey! You did not spell it out." We did not

spell everything out, but we did give this.

Luke 14:26-27 If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

Do you understand what Jesus is doing here? He says, "You have got to be loyal to Me above everybody else." That is the issue in making the covenant with God. It is one of loyalty. Why is loyalty demanded? Because disloyalty to God is idolatry. The way to keep ourselves on the straight and the narrow is to remember what we agreed to when we were baptized, that we were going to be loyal to Him. That is what keeps us from committing idolatry.

Now let us go in another little bit different direction as to why these scriptures here are so important. It is because the character of every life is determined by the loyalty that rules. Whoever we are faithful to is not only pointing out who our god is, but it is creating character at exactly the same time. It is engrained. All those choices, all those actions are engrained character in our mind. Is it the right kind? That is what the question needs to be.

Let us look at a scripture in Acts 5:29 that touches on this—to what Peter said to the people who were questioning him and the other Christians.

Acts 5:29 Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

This is Peter's reply to those who were threatening, and this was made of course following Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, and persecution was imminent against the fledgling church. Now we know and understand that the world is always a threat against our loyalty to Christ, as life is a mixture of choices, and compulsions, and since most of our values have their source in the world, these values are exerting and ever-present pressure to conform to them. This is a pressure that comes from the inside-out, because we have been doing it for so long, and the pressure to make moral choices is the furnace in which character is forged.

There are two widely different compulsions. The one is forced. This occurs like somebody holds a gun against your head and says, "Do it, or else." The second, though, is the pressure of old habits. Perspectives and attitudes engraved in our character are hangovers from the past, but they are there and they keep pushing at us to go back and do them again. So the past and the present both push us to choose. This is where I started. I started with Romans 14:22-23, and so we often find ourselves right in the middle of a real war that is going on. Which way should I go? And whichever way is chosen determines where one's loyalty lies, at least in that situation, and whether or not idolatry is committed. This is a very easy sin to fall into if one is not quite careful enough.

Let us touch on a scripture or two in Psalm 81. The author of this psalm is Asaph, and he said this:

Psalm 81:1-5 Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery. Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day. For this was a statute for Israel, and a law of the God of Jacob. This he ordained in Joseph for a testimony, when he went out through the land of Egypt: where I heard a language that I understood not.

In this particular psalm Asaph points out that God ordained this law that he is referring to. Now law is inseparable from sovereignty, and the god of any system can be identified by locating the source of its law. This is why Mr. Armstrong said that the church is the only place on earth in which the government of God is operating. I do not think people understood what he was saying. But let me make it simple. If people are not converted, God cannot truly be said to be their government. It is that simple, and people did not get it.

In the beginning of the United States of America our system of law and our standard of morality were listed wholesale, sometimes verbatim, from either the Magna Carta or the absolutes of the Bible. These people all had an English background. They were very familiar with the Magna Carta, and the Magna Carta is the one that laid out a standard of values that was based on the Scriptures. When the American founders founded a new nation on earth, they were familiar with the Magna Carta. They dragged things in from it, and not only that, they added far more biblical things to it than the English ever thought of, for one reason or whatever, and so the Constitution of the United States of America had its basis firmly planted in the laws of Almighty God.

However, after the Civil War the faces of our laws gradually switched from the absolutes of the Bible to human relativism. This is a philosophy that claims that there are no absolutes. It proclaims that every system's values—indeed everyone's values—are as good as the next person's. This idea began by them to simply be tolerant. But as the tempo gradually increased, it urged people to be pragmatic, and that is, to adapt, to make compromises in your values, and do whatever needs to be done regardless of conflicts with others' values.

So by the mid 1950s and on into the 1960s, "Situation Ethics" systems arose so that even church looked upon the Ten Commandments as mere suggestions and inconvenience, and these thoughts have crept into every area of life so that it now dominates our moral and ethical thinking in education, in religion, in childrearing, in marital relations, in economics, in agriculture, in healing, and in social programs. In Psalm 10: 4 is a very significant statement.

Psalm 10:4 The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts.

This is central to my concern as we begin this series on the Ten Commandments. My concern is because the first commandment is the most important one because it lays the foundation for all that follows. It is the source of one's values. If the source of one's values is not at the very highest order, it sets one up for certain moral and spiritual failure. No other source can even

begin to compare than those that find their roots in Almighty God.

The last phrase of this verse does not mean that the person spoken of here is an atheist, who believes that there is no God; rather he may be a nominal religious person, but he has no real regard for God, but considers himself realistic. He will be pragmatic. He will compromise. He will do what is necessary to get through a given situation. Rather this person is one who does not think often of God; that is, God plays no major role in his life, and in fact he actually purposely avoids Him. To him, God has not died, but He is still nonetheless an inconvenience that is brought into play only in times of extreme stress. When he gets worried, that is when he appeals to God. You know, "Help me." But you see, he has essentially chosen to live without Him, and thus is effectively worshipping himself.

We are going to go back to something that the Apostle John wrote that I know you are very familiar with, but I want you to see it maybe in a slightly different simple light.

I John 2:14-17 I have written unto you, fathers, because you have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the wicked one. Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passes away, and the lust thereof: but he that does the will of God abides for ever.

John's warning is against the world, and it is focused on the very reason why the source theme dominates this sermon. The word translated "world" probably most of you know is the Greek word "cosmos." It is used six times in these three short verses. This emphasis draws its importance to us.

The word "cosmos" literally means "orderly arrangement." In other words, it is a system. He is of course referencing the environmental and life-style system that we were born into, and it is this source from which our values originated, and these values are a confused mix of good and evil, specifically designed to entrap everyone of us in a web of death. This is why Proverbs 16: 25 can say there is a way that seems right, but it is going to produce death.

Now "cosmos" defines the system established on earth apart from the Creator God, and the system's source is Satan; therefore, it cannot produce life. Only God can produce life. The problem is that this system is very appealing to human nature, and it is continuously exerting pressure for us to return to it and its values.

It says "Love not the world." Let me give you a simple statement Jesus made. He said "No man can serve two masters. He is going to be loyal to one, and he is going to despise the other." If one loves the world, where is God? It is idolatry all over the place whenever we allow the world to dictate its values to us in any given situation. This is why the first commandment is the one that is broken most often. There is a constant pressure from the world to keep pushing its

values on us especially, and we are the ones that are led to situations where we get a guilty conscience. We do not know which way is right because of this war that is going on in our mind, where the mind, the carnal nature, wants to go one way, but we are being instructed by God which way is right for us to choose.

Let me ask you something. A simple situation. Our father Jacob went off and he married two women. Did he find it possible to love Leah even equally as much as he loved Rachel? Impossible. Oh! The pain it caused that man. Certainly he was tricked into it. You can tell who God was sympathetic to. It was Leah. He gave her six children at least. She was the mother of Dinah as well. It became a source of pain to Rachel because she could very clearly see that her sister—the one who was not loved—was the one who was being favored by God, the one God felt sympathy for. So, instead of Jacob and Rachel, for us it is God and the world. Where is our love? Where is our loyalty going to be given? Do you believe what Jesus said? We cannot have both. It is impossible.

John gives us a little bit more insight in the words that he chose to use as illustrations to what he meant. It says here "the lust of the flesh." He is referring here to human nature. Do you know what this indicates? There is much driving us. "Flesh" indicates a self oriented outlook that pursues its own end, independent of God. The idea is simply to satisfy the self, even if it is just momentarily. That produces idolatry. When I say satisfaction, I am talking about where there is a choice between alternatives.

Why did he use the word "eye"? Because it indicates being captivated of everything that entices the eye. This draws attention to the attraction of covetousness in one's life. Brethren, no generation has ever been hit with the enticement of the eye like this generation. Every time you turn on that television set you hear "Buy this!" "Buy this!" "Buy this!" And they give you a beautiful picture, always accompanied by a nice young lady—the things that attract the eye. The combination of all that sparkling color, the anticipation of the satisfaction, and that sparkling young lady makes the person be motivated to indulge himself, whether he can afford it or not. "You deserve a break today!"

What about the "pride of life"? This is really a rich one because it is probably at the foundation of the other two—the flesh and the eye—because pride indicates a pretentious hypocritical aloofness regarding himself, his possessions, and his accomplishments, and this right from the word "go" is idolatry.

In II Corinthians 4: 3-4 Paul writes this:

II Corinthians 4:3-4 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.

This verse directly names who has been the source of the spiritual beliefs and values of everybody in the world prior to their calling. And because he has been clever enough to include some of God's values within the system—the cosmos—that he created in and through men,

gives his system an air of righteous authority, enough so that we can feel good while doing evil.

I recently exchanged letters with a man who was taking me to task because I said that Christmas is idolatry, is pagan to the core, to the root, and so is Easter. This man wrote back and he said to me, "Doesn't it show in Luke that the angels came, worshipping God at the birth of Jesus Christ?" From this he extrapolated on that this gives man the permission to do whatever he good and well pleases if he thinks that it is pleasing to God, because he is praising God in what he does.

That is the way human nature is. In this case he took something biblical, and he twisted it to make it look good to human nature. So the fact that God gives no permission for doing that meant nothing to him. He gave himself permission to worship God the way he thinks is good. That is his ideal. That is his standard. So what happens? The word of God is pushed aside. This man is worshipping his own mind. He said enough in that letter to know that he would fight to hang onto this value.

You wonder where persecution is going to come from? It says right in God's word that people are going to kill the true believers, thinking that they do God service. Is that not what Paul did? In Paul's eyes it was perfectly logical and righteous to do such a thing. It was not until Christ blinded him on the road to Damascus, and said to him, "Why are you beating your head against the wall?" Until that time, Paul thought he was serving God.

Do you see how easy it is to be deceived for human nature to be deluded? You know that Paul had probably an awful spiritual hangover until he got over that fully, by knowing that God forgave him for what he did. I do not know whether people were actually killed at his hand. The Bible implies that some very possibly could have been. But even if nobody was killed, he certainly was persecuted in making life hard for him.

I want you to go to Matthew 22: 35-36.

Matthew 22:35-36-38 Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said unto him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment."

This is the commandment that lays down the foundation for all others that follow, and it has to do with fearing Him. This means thinking of Him in the very highest terms of respect and regard. It has to do with the service that is given to Him, for the admiration and the obedience and worship of Him.

The dictionary defines "worship" as having to do with ascribing intent, admiration, adoration, and honor and devotion to. The practical application of this is found in *our* response to God. I want you to consider these three questions.

number 1: If you know that somebody that you greatly respect and admire is going to be in your area, don't you make sincere effort to spend time with them, or at the very least see them, and perhaps even give them a gift?

number 2: If you know of one that you admire and know his or her habits well, don't you attempt to emulate them? In the world whole industries are built on this reality and this is why promoters attempt to get celebrities to endorse their products because they know people will do what these admired people are doing.

number 3: When the admired one even suggests that you are to do something, are you not at least moved to submit to that one's request?

It is these questions that are involved in our response to God. Do we have regard for Him? Do we admire Him? Do we have even a reverence for Him? Do we try to emulate Him? Do we seek Him out to find out more about Him so that we can emulate Him in as many ways as we possibly can?

These are compunctions to drive us to overcome idolatry, because we are doing those things toward the One who is really the true source of everything that is right. If we have these attitudes of respect for Him, we will begin to do as He does. Before He called us we were helpless before the forces and the pressures of this world. We had no other choice, but God's calling of us has changed the situation dramatically.

Exodus 20:1-3 And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the LORD your God, which have brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.

I am going to give you a better, more meaningful translation for that very last phrase. It is better if you understand it as "You shall have no other gods in *place* of Me." Do you know why? Because the word "before Me" allows enough wiggle room, and it can be argued that other gods are permitted as long as God is first. Not so. None at all is what the commandment says. "No other god in place of Me," and that includes the self, which is the god most of us have before Him.

Now how does God introduce Himself in the Bible? Right in the very first verse, in Genesis 1:1, it says, "In the beginning, God." He introduces Himself as the Creator. Do you understand that without Him there is nothing? There is absolutely nothing that matters, and that is the way He wants to be known to everyone of us. He is the One to whom we owe everything—every breath of air that we breathe, every drop of rain that falls, all of the plants, all of the animals. You cannot go anywhere without running into the fact that everything owes its existence to the Creator. If that is not enough to persuade us to go in that direction, because everywhere we look we see His handiwork, we see His power. We see evidence of the kind of character that is driving that Being. Has anything better come down the road?

Do you understand that the human beings you admire, whether because of the way they look, or for the talents and abilities and the skills they have developed, whether it is on a musical instrument or whether it is in athletics, God Himself is the model for all of that beauty, and all that expertise, and all of that ability, wisdom and mind power that you admire in the other people. What God has is so much better than anything that these human beings are able to illustrate before us by their skills. They are nothing by comparison.

Do you know that in Romans 1 God says there is not a human being on earth that has not been witness to that He is the Creator, and that everybody rejects it. And then follows Paul's illustrations of what mankind has produced as a result of following his own inclinations and Satan's, of course. It is no wonder things are the way they are, and God Himself puts the onus right on idolatry.

Let us conclude with Psalm 119:1-16. I do not know who wrote this, but it contains very valuable advice.

Psalm 119:1-16 Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD. [There is where His standards lie, and that person is going to be blessed.] Blessed are they that keep his testimonies, and that seek him with the whole heart. They also do no iniquity: they walk in his ways. You have commanded us to keep your precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep your statutes! Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all your commandments. I will praise you with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned your righteous judgments. I will keep your statutes: O forsake me not utterly. Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to your word. With my whole heart have I sought you: O let me not wander from your commandments. Your word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against you. Blessed are you, O LORD: teach me your statutes. With my lips have I declared all the judgments of your mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of your testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate in your precepts, and have respect unto your ways. I will delight myself in your statutes: I will not forget your word.

Here, brethren, is our goal in Christian life—being guided totally by the word of God.