

## 1 John 5:21 Keep Yourself from Idols

(This is 2<sup>nd</sup> version of this sermon I preached about 10 years ago.) To end his first letter, John says these words: “**Keep yourselves from idols.**” The reason I go here is because I want to follow up with my sermon two weeks ago as I linked anxiety with the desires of the heart. At the end of the day, the things we elevate in our hearts above God Himself and his worship, are idols. And so today’s sermon is merely a different angle, a different way of for us to examine our hearts and identify our idols. I give some credit to a book by G.K. Beals called: *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry*. I have four parts to this sermon: 1) A Definition of Idolatry. 2) The Dangers of Idolatry. 3) Identify our idols. 4) A Solution.

1. Definition of idolatry. What is an idol? And what does it mean to worship an idol? Well, in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; all things both seen and unseen, the heavenly hosts of angels, as well as the pinnacle of His creation, man. And all of his creation was good! Everything was in harmony. The focus of creation was a great, sovereign, holy, good God and his glory. And all creation worshipped Him and Him alone. All allegiance was given to Him. But then then there was a great fall, first with some of his angels, then with Adam and Eve. Sin entered God’s creation. And at the root of this sin was idolatry.

The 1st commandment in the Law of Moses is this: “**You shall have no other gods before me.**” This is the foundation of true worship. And the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment explains what this means: “**You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them**” (Exod. 20:3-5). Now, we often think of idolatry as the worship of man-made, wooden, stone, etc. images. But, Satan did not physically make an image when he fell. Adam did not physically make an idol and bow down to worship it. Yet, both of them committed idolatry. How? Satan said, “*I will be like God.*” This is idolatry. Adam and Eve, following the advice of the serpent, also thought they would be like God, and in their disobedience, they exchanged the true worship of God for a lie. This is idolatry.

Martin Luther defines it this way: “*whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your god; trust and faith of the heart alone make both god and idol.*” I would say an idol is “*whatever your heart clings to or relies on for ultimate security.*” In the end an idol is whatever claims the loyalty that belongs to God alone. This is the essence of sin.

2. Dangers of idolatry. Let me ask, “*Why is idolatry so bad?*” Why does God hate it so much? Well, idolatry is bad because **idolaters become like what they worship.** And when they do, they reflect false gods instead of the true God. And when this happens, something OTHER than God gets the focus. Instead of the glory of God, we see the glory of idols (whatever form this is.) All of us are good at imitating what we see. God made us this way. We reflect what is important around us. Think about children. Children reflect their parents. (Ex: my own kids. Caleb and Josiah are a modern, cool, image of me.) We bear the image of our parents. It’s like looking in a mirror. God made us this way.

In the same way when we worship idols, we reflect false gods instead of the true God. And what happens when we commit idolatry? We reflect those idols instead of God. And God says, “**My**

**glory I will not give to another”** (Is. 48:11). So, when we reflect idols (other things than God) we sin. And we sin by not reflecting Him. As God’s creation (men/women) we were created in the IMAGE OF GOD. And our command in this world is found in Gen. 1:27-28: **“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. <sup>28</sup> And God blessed them. And God said to them, Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”** God is saying to us: “as you go, as you live on this earth, as you have children, as you work, as you play, as you have dominion over my creation, BEAR MY IMAGE. So, to BEAR something else, to REFLECT something else, to BE LIKE something else is idolatry, which is at the root of all sins.

Probably the most famous idol in the Bible is the golden calf. As Moses was on the mountain speaking with God, Exod. 32:7 we read: **“And the LORD said to Moses, Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. <sup>8</sup> They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it and said, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!”** Now, I want you to notice what God says next. <sup>9</sup> **And the LORD said to Moses, I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.** Why stiff-necked? What does it mean? Well, they had become like the calf they worshipped, a dead, stiff-necked idol. Instead of alive and able to see and hear and follow the will of the Lord, they became like what they worshipped, a stiff-necked, dead cow. When Moses came down from the Mountain, his face shown bright, reflecting the glory of the Lord. Those who worshipped the calf reflected a dead idol. In the same way, when we worship idols, we become like them; we bear the image of our idols instead of bearing the image of God.

Ps. 115 tells us more about the characteristics of idols. In v. 3 we read: **“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases. <sup>4</sup> Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. <sup>5</sup> They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. <sup>6</sup> They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. <sup>7</sup> They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. <sup>8</sup> Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.”** Idols are blind. When we worship idols, we also become blind, blind to the truth, blind to spiritual things. Idols can’t hear. When we worship idols, we also, like them, can’t hear spiritual things. Idols can’t feel anything. When we worship idols, we become insensitive to the things of God, not being able to feel what we need to feel. In other places in the Bible we are told that idols are vain. They are empty. When we worship idols, we also worship vain, empty things. Do you see the danger of idolatry?

This is VERY important for us to understand. Throughout the Bible, those who worship idols are described as those who have eyes, but cannot see, those who have ears, but cannot hear. (See Isa 6:9-10). Jesus calls the Jewish religious leaders “blind guides” (Matt. 23:16) because of their idolatry. And their blindness, was in actuality, the judgment of God. In the same way, when we bow our hearts to the things of this world, whatever they are, we also become like them. And when we do, we reflect them and not the living God. And there may be a time when God says, *“OK, you can have your idols!”* Therefore, idolatry is eternally dangerous!

3. Identify our idols. So, what are our idols? In the OT it was the golden calf and the idol gods of foreign nations. In the NT, we find a generation during Jesus' time that would NEVER make an idol and bow down to it. In fact, they made sure they wouldn't become like the generations before them. BUT, they were still idol worshippers. Their idols were the traditions of men and temple worship instead of worshipping Christ, who is the true temple. Their idols were the praises of men. So, what are OUR "golden calves?" What are our idols? We must know what they are so we can identify them and stop bowing down to them. Let me mention a few and make some comments.

Money can be an idol. Now, we all need money. But Jesus says, "you can't serve both God and money." It can be an idol for both the poor and the rich (though more often with the rich).

Work can be an idol. If the aim of our work is merely to gain money in this world (even it is for the provision of our families), instead of the truth that God created us to work for his glory, work can be an idol. Husbands, do you work so much that you neglect to love your wife, does work consume your thoughts so much that you find no time to raise your kids and teach them to worship rightly? Are you consumed with worry about your work? If you find that you are sinfully anxious about work, this may indicate levels of idolatry.

I will not say much here, but sex is certainly an idol in this world. And sexual idolatry leads to all kinds of sins, horrible sins, sins that the Bible says to Christians, "***Do not even let them be named among you.***"

Another idol is the media, particularly television. I am not saying television in and of itself is bad. Here me clearly. I am not saying "do not watch television." It is simply how we approach it, whether it is idolatrous or not. It is dangerous when we develop an uncritical openness to the media's worldview. No matter what we think, we absorb what we watch and what we listen to. And what is the TYPICAL TV worldview? It is a worldview with little to no awareness of, or sensitivity to, God's working in everyday life. Have you ever heard a TV character say, "*Hey, let's take a look at Scripture and see what God says about this? Let's pray about this.*" Or, "*Let's go to the pastor and see what the Bible says about this or that problem.*"

Again, I am not saying to stay away from media. I am saying watch and listen with a critical ear. If we don't, we will become just like what we hear. We will, just like those on the television, become more and more deaf to the things of God. If media becomes an idol, we will stop thinking of the things of the Lord in the details of every-day life. Remember, idols make us insensitive. If all we do is watch a computer screen, we will become insensitive to the things of God. I think also along the same lines, technology can be an idol. My dad always said to me, "*These gadgets will be the end of us.*" Take away your phone for a couple days. How do you think you will respond? (lots of things here). If you remember from two weeks ago, the things that make you anxious are usually an indication of your heart.

A big idol in our day is amusement. How much time is spent amusing ourselves? And YES, we must include sports in this list. As families, we must ask ourselves does the time and money and effort we spend on amusement take us away from the regular means of grace like Bible reading, prayer, family worship, gathering together regularly with the church, etc.

Another idol is “dead traditions” that make their way into the church, but are not biblical (This was the sin with the religious leaders of Jesus’ day.) And when cultural traditions become idols, we become like them: dead, lifeless, no spirituality. Etc. Along with this in the church is pragmatism, in other words, highlighting “what works” instead of that which most biblical.

There is a lot we could say here. And there are soooo many other idols I could mention. But, underneath all these things the greatest idol of our culture is the worship of self. *“It’s all about me, myself, and I. I want what I want.”* We may think that this life is OUR life, that we discover OUR gifts, for OUR career, for OUR family and so on. Everything is about what I/WE do for God. We invite people to Christ because He can give them *“a better life.”* We say, *“With Christ, you will be bigger, better stronger, more likeable, enjoy this life better now.”* When we visit churches, we ask, *“What do I like? What does this church offer ME and MY FAMILY,”* instead of saying, *“What can I give?” “How can I serve?”*

4. Solution to idolatry. Again, there are so many idols. And our hearts continually make new ones. So, what is the solution? Well, it is helpful that we identify them through the preaching of the Word. And in a general way, this is what we are doing. But, we cannot stop idol worship with merely identifying our idols.

In the end, the solution to idolatry is the power of Christ. Look back at 1 John 5:20: **“And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ.”** Jesus Christ came to show us who to worship. **“If you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father.”** And he came to make the way for us to worship the true God. Brothers and Sisters, he died on the cross as a substitute sacrifice for our sins. And he rose again and lives today, not like dead, vain, empty idols. And those who are in Christ are new creations. The image of God is restored. And if you are in him, you reflect the living God and not the idols of this world. 2 Cor. 3:18 says, **“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”**

For the Christian, it is the power of God in the Gospel of Christ that works in us: We are **“being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this come from the Lord who is the Spirit.”** Think back to our example of the golden calf with Israel. By worshipping a dead, stiff-necked statue, they became like what they worshipped, dead, stiff-necked, not able to hear, not able to see, etc. Well, as Christians, who do we worship? We worship the risen Christ who sits at the right hand of God. And as we look to Him we are being transformed by his power. This means if you are a Christian, your life is constant, powerful, continual, growth in godliness.

And, as we consider 1 John 5:21: **“Keep yourselves from idols,”** we must remember that John has already told his readers what a Christian looks like. He gives them a test. He asks, *“Do you love God and his Son?” “Do you love the Word of God, do you love the commands of Christ?” “Do you love God’s people? Do you regularly meet with God’s people?”* Brothers and sisters, these aren’t the things people do in order to become a Christian. These ARE what Christians do! Why? Because **“if any man be in Christ he is a new creation”** (2 Cor. 5:17). To put it another

way, we do these things because we worship the true and living God through the person and work of Christ. At the end of the day We can't merely get rid of idols without replacing the deeper parts of the heart in worship as we look unto Christ. (speak to Christians and non-Christians)

Let me end this morning with some of my favorite verses on how the power of Christ works in us and then read 1 John 5:21 again.

Titus 2:11-14: **“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”**

With these things in mind, I hope we can feel the seriousness of John's words at the end of this letter: **“Little Children, keep yourselves from idols.”**