

## The Curse of Idolatry

God has always hated idolatry because it insults His glory and design. Augustine said: “Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless still till they find their rest in Thee”. God made us for Himself, and when we use what He has made as a substitute for Him, His name is offended. He is robbed of glory, as our hearts, which were made to find rest in God, give greater value to something God has made, rather than to God Himself. So the battle in idolatry is not God competing with other gods. It is God competing with the desires of man’s heart. God deserves, and demands first place. God is glorified when man sets all his heart on God, and is robbed of glory when man looks elsewhere. Now idolatry takes three forms, one very obvious, the other two more subtle.

### 1) Pagan Idolatry

The first and most obvious kind of idolatry is the outward, ritualistic worship of false gods. Jeremiah mocks the obvious ridiculousness of pagan idolatry in 2:27 that says to a tree or a stone: you are my father; you brought me forth, which actually sounds surprisingly like some modern theories of human origins. He goes on to say in 10:3-5 that a man cuts down a tree, and then decorates it. This image now has to be bolted down so that it won’t fall over. Moreover, it has to be carried. Some god, Jeremiah says. Paul traces the origin of pagan idolatry in Romans 1:18-25.

But there is a darker and more sinister side to this pagan idolatry. Since man was seeking a substitute for his rejection of worshipping God, God’s enemies have always been only too happy to pose as gods themselves. Paul, while acknowledging that idols are nothing in and of themselves (1Co 8:4-6), shows that what they represent are really demons:

*“What say I then? that the idol is any thing, or that which is offered in sacrifice to idols is any thing? But I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's Table, and of the table of devils.  
(1Co 10:19-21)*

So pagan idolatry, which is still very much with us today, is a double-tragedy. Not only is man worshipping idols he made up in rejection of God, but he is unwittingly ending up in bondage to demon-worship.

The unfortunate thing is that most Christians tend to associate the word idolatry with this form of idolatry, and therefore regard themselves as innocent of idolatry. But idolatry has two other forms which are far more subtle, and far more insidious than the outward worshipping of stone and wood idols. You could say that from one point of view, the outward form of worshipping stone idols is the least dangerous form, since such an idolater is in total darkness, waiting for the light of the Gospel to shine in his heart. The other two forms are in some ways worse, for they happen right inside the temple of God – right inside the heart of a believer.

*Paul said in 2 Cor 6:16: “And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God”.*

Yet idolatry can occur within the temple of God. We know this because Paul warns his readers to flee from idolatry, as does the apostle John. Isn't it redundant to call on believers to flee from idols? Doesn't Paul even define the conversion of the Thessalonians as "... ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1Th 1:9). Well, obviously, since the epistles are written to believers, they must refer to another form of idolatry which does not mean apostatising, turning back to the pagan idolatry.

So the second form of idolatry which Christians can be guilty of is found in:

*Colossians 3:5: "Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, [impurity], [passion], evil [desire], and covetousness, which is idolatry:"*

**2) Paul defines the next form of idolatry as covetousness.** When God commanded the Israelites, "*Thou shalt not covet*", He meant, do not desire for yourself what is not yours to have. Do not desire what belongs to your neighbour which you cannot take. Thus when David began to lust after Bathsheba – he was coveting. He was desiring what belonged to Uriah, and was not lawful for him to have.

Coveting often then includes comparing yourself to others, and wishing you had what they had. Materialism is an open and shut case of covetousness. Jesus said:

*Luke 12:15: "And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth." (Luk 12:15).*

Covetousness is the exaltation of things. I like how John MacArthur put it: "Mr. and Mrs. Thing are a very pleasant and successful couple. At least, that's the verdict of most people who tend to measure success with a 'thing-o-meter.' And when the 'thing-o-meter' is put to work in the life of Mr. and Mrs. Thing, the result is startling. There he is, sitting down on a luxurious and very expensive thing, almost hidden by a large number of [other] things.... things to sit on, things to sit on, things to cook on, things to eat from, all shining and new - things, things, things. Things to clean with, things to wash with, things to clean and things to wash; things to amuse, things to give pleasure, things to watch, and things to play; things for the long, hot summers, things for the short, cold winters; things for the big thing in which they live, things for the garden, things for the lounge, things for the kitchen, and things for the bedroom. Things on four wheels, things on two wheels, things to put on top of the four wheels, things to pull behind the four wheels, things to add to the interior of the thing on four wheels. "Things, things. things, and there in the middle are Mr. and Mrs. Thing, smiling, pleased with themselves, thinking of more things to add to their collection....Security in a castle of things!. This is the heart of covetousness – having more things will surely bring me pleasure. But, there are no Venter trailers behind hearses. You can't take them with you.

Now why should covetousness be idolatry? What is the connection between coveting and being an idolater?

Hebrews 13:5 has the answer: "*Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor*

*forsake thee.*”. Materialism, coveting possessions is idolatry for this reason: it says: God you are not enough. The writer of Hebrews says – be content with what you have because you have God! The opposite of this attitude is covetousness. Covetousness, at its heart, says – God is not enough. God does not satisfy me. All that God is for me in Christ is not what will really bring me joy. I need a new thing to make me happy. And James calls it not only idolatry, but adultery.

In other words – this passionate desire for things outside of God causes men to be violent and predatory. It causes our prayers to become consumerist – we want God to provide things for us and we want more than Him. God is a means to an end, not the ultimate end. This is adultery. This asks God to provide the means to pursue a love relationship with someone or something outside of Him. And the thing you pursue ultimate pleasure and meaning from – is your god. Whatever we make our ultimate source of meaning, purpose, fulfilment and joy – that thing or person is our god. It rules us – we serve it. Covetousness is the worship of money and the things money can buy - it’s idolatry.

Jesus confronted this form of idolatry with many stern warnings and exhortations to not make money your god. His words are echoed by the apostles in their writings. Covetousness is a deadly form of idolatry subtly tolerated by some churches, and overtly promoted by some others.

The third form of idolatry is perhaps the most subtle of all. A.W. Tozer summed it up when he eloquently wrote the following: “Let us beware lest we in our pride accept the erroneous notion that idolatry consists only in kneeling before visible objects of adoration and civilised peoples are therefore free from it. The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him.”

**3) The third form of idolatry is worshipping the true God with wrong and faulty views of who He is, His will, His purposes, His ways, His character.** It is to superimpose on God our view of Him, and expect Him to react to us based on our own imagination. Therefore, millions of Christians are guilty of idolatry as they read of the true God in Scripture, and create Him in their own image. This happens in three ways.

Firstly, some Christians try to represent God or Christ pictorially. They use images, pictures and objects of Him. This is clearly dangerous and quite possibly, a violation of the second commandment: “*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:*” (Exo 20:4)

If this was only a command against worshipping false gods, it would be a repeat of the first command. But it seems to be a prohibition against worshipping the true God by means of images. No one knows how Christ looked when He was on earth, and therefore it can be but mere speculation to portray Him pictorially, and then idolatry if we pray to that representation of Jesus. Furthermore, Paul wrote in 2 Cor 5:16: “*Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard Him thus no longer*”. Worshipping Jesus as the man from Nazareth is not what we are to do. He appeared to John as the Risen, Eternal Lamb – which caused John to fall at His feet as dead.

The second way Christians commit this sin is with the New Age practice of visualising Jesus. This shamanistic technique of trying to imagine Jesus in various scenes, and thereby cause Him to be close to you is not found in Scripture, it is found in occultic literature. It is a dangerous practice, which no Christian should have a part in. The 'Jesus' that appears to those who open their minds up to this New Age technique may in fact be a demon masquerading as Christ.

Now let us balance this by saying there is a right use of the imagination which is not idolatry. When John describes the appearance of Jesus in the book of Revelation, immediately our imagination goes to work to try and understand how He appeared. That's fine – otherwise God would not include those descriptions. What is wrong is when we try to picture God in our minds, and then speak to that picture. That can become idolatry. God is a Spirit, and we need to speak to Him, not to an image of Him.

The third way Christians commit this sin is by ignorance of His Person through neglect of His Word. God said in Psalm 50 that the unbeliever thought God was just like him. Without the constant intake of the Word of God, we are very prone to anthropomorphise God. We end up saying things like, "God wouldn't do that" or "God is not like this" or "God won't expect this of you" and we make those statement based not on Scripture but on our own human expectations, on our own view of right and wrong, on our own concept of justice and authority. What is worse is when we teach these human versions of God as truth. We can exaggerate one attribute of God over another. We can play His attributes off each other – as if His love is fighting His justice, or His wrath fighting His mercy. We can portray Him as moody, as schizophrenic, as grumpy, as sentimental, as distant, as soft. Now God gave us a clear manifestation of God in man – that was His Son Jesus Christ. We do not have to picture God behaving like one of us out of our own speculation. We have four Gospels telling us what God was like as a man.

What is worse, many Christians serve, praise, and pray to this god they have painted over every line of Scripture. They teach about and even share this self-conjured version of Yahweh with others. Thus, they can never learn, because they are constantly shaping Scriptures to fit their view of God, rather than letting Scripture shape their view of God. Many ecstatic praise and worship services are emotional ecstasy surrounding human imagination. There is no illumination of Christ from the Scriptures by the Spirit, there is simply the fleshly thrill at the made-up idea of God.

Really, the Pharisees were an example of this kind of idolatry. By the time Jesus comes on the scene, they had formed a view of God based on their own ideas. God Himself appears in the flesh before them, and what do they say – you don't fit our idea of what Messiah should be like! They had become idolaters – worshipping God on their own terms, in their own minds.

Now the Bible has many warnings about idolatry and its effects:

1) **Firstly, idolatry will damn your soul.** That's because salvation is when you come to see Christ not only as your Saviour but as your Treasure.

*"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. (Mat 13:44)*

Idolatry is treasuring anything more than God. And anyone who treasures something more than God all his life without repentance is unsaved, and therefore on their way to hell. Idolatry destroys you, because it fills the void, numbing the pain of emptiness, while you remain in rejection of God's salvation.

People who trust in false gods for eternal life will find that they missed it altogether. Jesus proclaimed Himself as the door. A door restricts access – it is the sole point of entry. Jesus is **the** door, not merely **a** door.

The Bible warns that the idolatry of the second kind – materialism, can also damn a soul. “And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples

*: How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!” (Mar 10:23)*

That is because when money is your god, it is a hard god to let go of to find the true God. Jesus echoed this when He gave the parable of the sower and mentioned the seed that grew up but was choked by the thorns of riches.

Idolatry of the third kind can also damn a soul – especially the religious soul. This is the one who thinks he knows God because he has been in church for so long, has lived a reasonably moral life, has been with Christians, and projects onto God his self-created view that God must accept him because of this. He does not embrace the God of the Bible who regards him as a sinner needing repentant faith; he imagines that God has always accepted him and he is right with God. He will be one of those to whom Jesus will one day say: “*I never knew you*”

## **2) Idolatry blinds and deafens you spiritually**

“The idols of the heathen *are* silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; They have ears, but they hear not; neither is there *any* breath in their mouths. They that make them are like unto them: *so is* every one that trusteth in them.  
(Psa 135:15-18)

The Psalmist says those who make and trust in idols become like them. They are blind, deaf and dumb. Now what does that mean? Does it mean you will physically go blind or deaf or dumb? No, I believe since the psalmist is dealing with the religious worship of idols, he is speaking of spiritual sight, hearing and speech. He is saying that idolatry destroys your spiritual senses. You become less and less aware of spiritual realities. The pagan idolater grows increasingly darkened in his understanding. The materialist increasingly denies the place of the supernatural. If you place your hope in the temporal things like TV, toys and technology, pretty soon, Jesus becomes unreal, faraway, like a fantasy. If you open your Bible or sit in sermons and God seems almost like a fairy tale, it's probably because throughout the week you are looking for ultimate joy in things outside of God. You are looking to created things the satisfy you, and it cannot. And since you train your eyes, ears and tongue to sense and speak of things other than God, you find those sense grow increasingly dull when it comes to God. Even the third form of idolatry blinds you. You cannot see and savour God because you insist on superimposing your imagined view of God on every passage. Therefore revival becomes an impossibility, because

you are blind and deaf to any other view of God than the one you have created in your own mind.

### **3) Thirdly, idolatry shrinks your heart.**

In Jeremiah 2:5: *“they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain?”*

Idolatry is empty and makes you empty. Pursuing the small and temporary things that money can buy makes you a small and temporary person. If you do not eat food, your stomach tends to shrink. If you do not feed your soul on God, it shrinks to accommodate the small things you are feeding it. You compress the void of your heart into the small shape of computers, cars and careers. So our affections, hopes, motivations, goals, ambitions and desires become small, shallow and superficial. We become people as vain, and trivial as the wind itself. We were created with incredible capacities for joy, but have settled for the lukewarm joys of sin, which have shrivelled our hearts. It is not for no reason that the Psalmist wrote:

*“I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart.” (Psa 119:32)*

Why would a heart need enlarging? Because sin and idolatry shrink it. Those who pursue money become shallow, and time bound. Those who create God in their own image never experience the true fear of the LORD, because a God of your own imagination will never surprise, overawe or even terrify you. True worship will continually stretch the heart as it bursts with ever increasing knowledge of God. False worship will keep the heart as shrivelled up as it is now.

One of the terrible effects of modern media is not only its defiling effect through scenes of sex, violence and profanity, but its trivialising effect. TV does not portray the grand themes of eternal life, God’s glory, spiritual warfare, the return of Christ, the eternal torment of the wicked. Instead, it makes life out to be nothing more than a playground. A steady diet of seeking your ultimate joy from TV, movies, music, magazines, computer games will shrink your mind to where it never thinks about eternity, about God and the unseen world.

How do we overcome idolatry?

The answer lies in seeing the two sides of the same truth – the emptiness of idols, and the uniqueness of God. God makes this point clear in Jer 2:12-13:

*“Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”*

The Lord explains the horror, and therefore the cure to idolatry. Idolatry is the forsaking of God, the fountain of living water which is evil number one, and then digging out broken cisterns, unable to hold water – that’s evil number two. Here is God, the inexhaustible, self-replenishing fountain, and in comparison, here is an artificial, man made reservoir, full of holes and defects. The one provides a continual stream of fresh, life-giving water. The other cannot even hold water long enough to

provide a drink. God is comparing Himself to a life-giving fountain, unceasingly quenching the thirst of those who will simply drink from it. God compares idols to the stagnant, dirty, shallow water of a poorly made reservoir. The analogy is clear. God will satisfy you, and will never run dry. Idols can never satisfy you, because they are as limited as the people that made them. Idols – whether they be, pagan gods, the god of materialism, or a false view of the true God, will never satisfy your soul. You will keep coming up short.

The true God will totally, and finally satisfy you. God used the same reasoning before giving the greatest commandment of all. They read:

*“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. (Deu 6:4-5)*

Notice that the first and great commandment to love God with all your heart soul and might is preceded by the words – “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God *is* one LORD” The writer means for us to see that the command is based upon this phrase. In the Hebrew it can literally be rendered as – Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, He alone is the LORD”. In other words that verse stresses His uniqueness, His supremacy. The logic seems to be that since God alone is God, since He is unique, since He alone is what He is – love Him with all your heart, soul and might. That’s exactly the cure for idolatry. Seeing and believing that God alone is the satisfier of the human heart, that no one is like Him, that He alone can quench our thirsts will cause us to abandon idols and run to Him.

We must believe that if God is God, if God is jealous for His glory, then He would not create the human heart to be satisfied with anything else but Himself. He would not allow something He has created to outstrip Him in glory. He will not allow a work of His hands to be esteemed more valuable than Himself. Therefore, to treasure any one of His gifts above Him is to fall short of the satisfaction He intended. To worship the god we want instead of the God who is, is to fall short of His satisfaction.

We can close with the piercing words of Elijah: “And Elijah came unto all the people, and said:

*How long [will you go limping] ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.” (1Ki 18:21)*