

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Various Topics: God or Idolatry

This morning's talk is entitled, "God or Idolatry." The basic idea of the word "idol" is the image or likeness of a god used as an object of worship, but we also use idol to mean "any object of worship; an object of love, admiration or honour, usually to an extreme degree." Idolatry is the actual worship of an idol. The idol may be an image in a pagan temple, or some physical object, a person, or even an idea.

These definitions cover a range of things which catch the human attention. In fact, these words, idol and idolatry, cover virtually everything we set our minds on except the one true God and worshipping Him. Ever since the Fall, humanity has had a strong tendency to worship something or someone other than God, our Creator, the One to whom we are ultimately responsible. As we read through the Bible, we see that people's automatic religious activity was idolatry. We read in the Romans 1:21-23 "...although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things." In other words, early man knew of the existence of God but lost that awareness by what they thought was their own cleverness. Instead of giving God the thanks and the worship which was His due, they made images of lower creatures and worshipped those in His place.

Why do people worship idols? Well, one answer is just sinful perversity. It's our natural tendency to do anything rather than give God His rightful place in our lives and in the world as a whole. This is true, not just of people who may not think very deeply, but also of people who you would think very rational - and they certainly think they are - scientists, for example. One famous geneticist is on record as saying, "We cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." Such a person would accept perhaps any explanation for the existence of the universe and everything in it as long as that explanation did not include God as its Creator. This tendency to prefer anyone to God was at its height when people openly preferred Barabbas, a murderer, to the Lord Jesus, whom they wanted crucified even though He had done nothing but good.

The myths associated with idolatry are partly attempts to explain the origin of the Creation and to explain natural phenomena. Today we have the Big Bang and evolution instead to explain the universe and how we got where we are. And they are handy ways of disposing of God.

Another reason is the search for human happiness. We all want the feel-good factor. Think about it; isn't everything we do based on this urge? We may do things that we find extremely unpleasant; we may put up with a situation we hate. These don't make us happy. No, but the alternative to them is often even worse. Then, of course, people can go to any lengths to get what they think will make them happy, all too often to lengths that harm themselves and other people. The pursuit of happiness can make us very selfish.

This may seem a long way from our subject - God or Idolatry - but it's really quite close. People feel the need to ensure their general wellbeing and, if they haven't got God, they'll have something else. It may be the need to ward off potential dangers, so people have lucky mascots or superstitions. In the past, in cultures other than our own, and certainly in Biblical times, people worshipped idols to ensure good crops, military success, having children, safe travel and generally making life better. It usually involved making sacrifices to the gods and goddesses or even the ancestors to keep them happy so that they didn't do unpleasant things to the worshippers, and to persuade the gods to do what the worshipper wanted by the size and expense of the sacrifice, and the devotion the worshipper was showing. In other words, people manipulated or bribed the idols into answering their prayers. This is not the way to approach God. The Christian serves and worships God, not to twist His arm into doing something for us but because of what He has made us and the relationship we have with Him. We should be able to approach God without any image or picture but, unfortunately, we do like something we can see.

To be an idolater, you have to have an idol to worship. Someone has to make it because it won't just happen by itself. We read in a number of places in the Bible of God's anger against idolatry but in Isaiah 40:9-20 we read of His contempt. It's too long a passage to quote in full but the important points are that making an idol is useless and causes the person making it to be useless. They do not understand. What is the point of making one? The man making it has no special strength - as he works, he faints from hunger and thirst. A man cuts down a tree he has

selected and half of it he burns to warm himself and to cook food. The other half he makes into his god and bows down and prays to it for deliverance. No one has the understanding to stop and see the foolishness of what he is doing bowing down to a block of wood.

The foolishness of it seems obvious enough when it is spelt out like this but it is what we unthinkingly do when we don't worship the true God.

In complete contrast, there was no physical representation of the God of Israel at all and the Israelites were forbidden to try and make one. When God made Himself present on Mount Sinai soon after the start of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land, the mountain burned with fire, and there was darkness, cloud and thick darkness. The people heard the voice of God and saw the fire etc. But they did not see God Himself - no shape or form. And so they were forbidden to make any image of Him and they never did. I understand that archaeologists working on sites in Israel have not found any image of God. Any representation of God could only be far less than what He truly is. In any case, we know from John 4 that God is spirit; He has no physical shape.

In the passage from Isaiah which I quoted, we see amongst other things, not only the folly of idolatry but also that idolatry blinds the idolater to what he is really doing. We read in other passages that the idolater becomes like the idol. The fact that idolatry has had such a grip on humanity for so long shows its power to blind. And the fact that the idolater becomes like the idol shows that he is doing more than bowing down before an image; he is coming into contact with the demon behind the idol. The Apostle Paul tells us in his 1 Corinthians 10:19-21 that what the Gentiles sacrificed, they sacrificed to demons, and he did not want his readers to have fellowship with demons. For his readers to be present at a religious function which involved demon-worship (Paul doesn't dignify them by calling them "gods") meant that they were sharing in it. He calls it the "cup of demons" and the "table of demons." He was completely unimpressed by the architectural glories of Greek temples and didn't think too much of Greek philosophy, either.

There was also another factor for the Israelite; it was that idolatry meant deserting his or her God for another god, which wasn't even a god but a completely powerless thing. It was God who had brought them out of Egypt and made a nation of them. It was God who provided all the things that they sacrificed to idols. He saw Himself as Israel's husband and so idolatry was adultery - not as bad as adultery but actual adultery, with all the sordid muckiness that the word implies. It hurt God then; it surely must do the same now.

There were other results for Israel. As we read through the Old Testament, we see that idolatry lowered moral standards. Immorality became much more common. The rich became greedy and the poor were oppressed. There was increased violence but it could not be dealt with properly because the judges were corrupt. No one could be relied upon. Those claiming to proclaim God's word were just making it up. During the last days of the kingdom of Judah, people in Jerusalem actually sacrificed their children to the god Moloch. Because of this and their other evils, God pronounced judgment on them through his prophets, who saw what the nation was bringing on itself. And judgment did come. The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and Judah was carried away captive to Babylon in what we now call Iraq.

I only mention the history of Israel because, not only do we have it in some detail in the Bible, but also because, in the Bible, we have God's view of it. I could have quoted other passages as the Bible is not short of denunciations of idol worship. Of course, Israel's neighbours were every bit as bad, but there was this difference, in that they had had no revelation from God, apart from Creation. But Israel were in God's eyes a special, indeed, a unique, nation. God had revealed Himself to them through their history, especially by delivering them from slavery in Egypt and by making them a nation. He had given them the land we now call Israel and had preserved them through the centuries from their enemies. He had also given them His Law (the Ten Commandments etc) to show them how they could live in a way which was consistent with being the people of a holy God. It revealed God's character, too, as being righteous and gracious. He also sent Israel prophets who spoke God's word to the nation. No other nation has ever had that kind of relationship with God. As Moses said in Deuteronomy 4:7-8, "For what great nation is there that has gods (or the God) so near to it, as the Lord our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgements as are in all this law which I set before you this day?" But the blessing of this and the realisation of God's other promises were dependent on Israel's keeping God's law and, above all, on not committing idolatry.

"Well," we may say, "That happened a long time ago and we don't worship idols now. Perhaps in other countries, but not here." That is not entirely true. There are people who worship literal idols - gods and goddesses or demons - even if it is not very common. But actually, idolatry is very widespread because the principle of it is in the hearts of us all. Earlier on, I mentioned that we had a strong tendency to look to anything for our wellbeing as long as it wasn't God. Just as the Israelites and their neighbours and virtually every culture the world around felt the need to approach, worship and appease something bigger than themselves - a supernatural being - so we feel the need for something outside of ourselves which will get us the material things we want, make us feel better, make us feel safe, give us success. If we won't have God, we'll have something else.

Well, of course, some people do wear lucky charms, Saint Christopher's, or even white heather to bring them luck. Some people consult others who use astrology, tea leaves, crystal balls, tarot cards etc to foretell the future. In some countries, apparently, there are some business men and even government ministers who will consult astrologers to find the most propitious dates for their plans. And there are people who are amazingly superstitious.

But that's not all. We can't just say, "We don't do that sort of thing so we are completely free of this problem." As I said before, the tendency to idolatry is within each one of us. Today, we tend to replace God with things which in themselves may be good or even unavoidable. What are these? Well, money for a start; we can do a lot of good with it in a variety of ways; at the very least, it enables us to obtain the things we need to stay alive, clothed, housed, and all the rest of the necessary things in life which, generally speaking, we can't get without money. So money can be a good servant but, as the Bible tells us, it is the root of every kind of evil. Money can also buy safety and peace of mind; at least, that is what we hope and that's what the insurers tell us. And we prefer that to trusting God and knowing His peace, the peace which passes understanding.

Materialism and the prosperity it both gives rise to and increases keep us away from God. What we possess and what that makes us are all that matter. When our happiness depends on how much we are worth, how much we own, acquiring the latest must-have gadget or handbag or whatever, we've become idolaters. We can become awfully greedy. In fact, western society and the functioning of the country depend on greed - the urge to acquire more than we need. Materialism has done more to sap to strength of Christianity in the west than anything else.

Education - we definitely need education. For a start, without education, our understanding of God's Word would be severely limited - we wouldn't even be able to read it - but it is no good relying on education to make the world a morally better place. It's educated people that have introduced so many false and harmful ideas.

Sport can be a good thing, especially for our health and engendering team spirit and a sense of belonging. It can build a person's character. But when the mood of a nation depends on whether their team is winning or losing, when individual sportsmen or teams are idolised, when everything sportsmen and sportswomen do becomes an important news item, when unpleasant rivalry is created, it's not so good. It becomes another idol.

Science and technology - where would we be without them? They have greatly improved our lives. There is no end of things that we can now do better and faster, or understand better (and some of us find science and technology very interesting) but how much truly better are we for all of them? Sinful men use them for wicked purposes - wars, violence, immorality and corruption. Science and technology might improve life but they don't improve us; we're not better people as a result of the advances they bring. Worse still, they tend to block out any awareness we might have that we really do need God. Wrongly used, they explain away God.

Health - we all want more of that, both for ourselves and for others. It is God's concern as well. The Lord Jesus restored the health of countless people when He was here on earth. He even raised the dead, the ultimate cure. Of course, God wants us to look after properly the bodies He has given us, and the Christian has an additional reason for doing this, and to use our bodies for holy living. We read in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, we are not our own, we were bought with a price, and so we are to glorify God in our body. But when we are obsessed with fitness, weight, health provision, the latest food craze, the latest sort of yoga and all the rest, we've got ourselves another idol.

And people love power. It's obvious that somebody has to run the place and, in fact, God has delegated this authority to do so to mankind. But some individuals do want it very badly. The lust for power can give rise to monsters like Saddam Hussein but fortunately this is comparatively rare. We're more likely to meet the lust for power at work or, very sadly, even at home.

For the same reason as I gave earlier, politics seems unavoidable but it generally seems to degenerate into the wrong sort of ambition, rivalry, corruption, the lust for power and all the nasty things we're all-too familiar with. Voting in another leader may bring about certain improvements, sometimes quite considerable, but it won't make us better people.

And then there's sex. There's no need to dwell on that as something that people look to as the be all and end all of life. We mustn't forget, either, fashion and the following it has. We have to wear clothes but it shouldn't be the obsession it is for some people. The arts are another thing which can be a substitute for God, because they can have a very definite effect on people, often quite uplifting. And what about entertainment? It surely has no equal for taking us out of ourselves and blotting out any thought of God. It also creates the entirely wrong mood for any approach to God. But if people refuse God, what else is there but entertainment of some kind?

These things I've mentioned have certain things in common. The first is that many of them can be used for good but that they are frequently debased. The second thing is that they are more or less unavoidable but that people rely on them for their sense of wellbeing instead of on God and a true relationship with Him. Thirdly, the idol that we are worshipping is frequently ourselves and our own self-will - what we own, how we look, what power we have, what we can get out of life, and, of course, the basic urge - how can we be happy. And fourthly, we use them to take us out of ourselves as a substitute for the supernatural element which comes from knowing God.

This takes us back to the Garden of Eden when the serpent fooled Eve into believing that God was keeping something back that would make her happier. The serpent said to her, "For God knows that in the day you eat of it (that is, the forbidden fruit) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So there was born the route to what we hope will be the way to happiness - making gods of ourselves and disobeying God. It doesn't work. Satan's promises are only half true. Yes, Adam and Eve did know good and evil but it didn't make them like God, and all of humanity's problems stemmed from that one act of disobedience. Worshipping ourselves and our likes and dislikes, our ambitions and our fears, trying to find someone or something outside of ourselves - demon worship, money and what it will buy, a football team, a pop star, politics, and all the rest - will not make us what we want to be. They will not make us like God, able to be the masters of our own fate. We need to worship Him, the one true God. And we can only know Him through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

How can the Christian get the right balance? We have to be careful to avoid the things which distract us from worshipping Him and from relying on Him, from finding our sense of wellbeing - our happiness - in Him. We have to use the things we need to live and to serve God but we have to remember that all that is good comes from God. Remember that, for Israel, idolatry was adultery; it was being unfaithful to their God. This principle is just as true for Christians today with the added difficulty that for us it is not bowing down before a literal idol but it is more steering clear of the excesses of this age. It is looking to God and not to the things which mankind has created. It is being faithful to Him when the rest of society does its best to ignore Him and live without Him. The Lord Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Matthew 6:24). So it really is God or idolatry.

Let the Bible have the last word. The very last verse of John's First Epistle says, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." (1 John 5:21)

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