

IDOLATRY

"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."
(1 Corinthians 10:14)

IDOLATRY

When Paul wrote the Roman letter, scriptural evidence suggests he was in the city of Corinth. What Paul saw in the city of Corinth is reflected in what he wrote:

"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."
(Romans 1:20-25)

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The city of Corinth had a well-established culture of idolatry. Many of those who became Christians in that city had formerly practiced the sin of idolatry and needed to heed Paul's exhortation:

"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."
(1 Corinthians 10:14)

Peter notes that idolatry should be a thing of the past:

"For the time already past is sufficient for you to have carried out the desire of the Gentiles, having pursued a course of sensuality, lusts, drunkenness, carousing, drinking parties and abominable idolatries." (1 Peter 4:3)

And John warns Christians to be on guard:

"Little children, guard yourselves from idols."
(1 John 5:21)

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The sin of idolatry has a long running history with God's people going all the way back to the days of the patriarchs when Rachel stole the idols that belonged to her father Laban before they fled from him.

"When Laban had gone to shear his flock, then Rachel stole the household idols that were her father's. And Jacob deceived Laban the Aramean by not telling him that he was fleeing. So he fled with all that he had; and he arose and crossed the Euphrates River, and set his face toward the hill country of Gilead." (Genesis 31:19-21)

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Even after God rescued His people from Egyptian bondage, they quickly turned back to idolatry:

"Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron said to them, 'Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.'"
(Exodus 32:1-4)

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In the Ten Commandments given to Moses, God's first and second commandments dealt specifically with idolatry:

"You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments." (Exodus 20:3-6)

They were commanded to not even speak their names:

"Now concerning everything which I have said to you, be on your guard; and do not mention the name of other gods, nor let them be heard from your mouth."
(Exodus 23:13)

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Before they entered the promised land, the Israelites were commanded to drive out the inhabitants of the land, and to destroy all of their idolatrous elements so as to not to adopt their evil practices.

"You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place. You shall not act like this toward the LORD your God. But you shall seek the LORD at the place which the LORD your God will choose from all your tribes, to establish His name there for His dwelling, and there you shall come. There you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the contribution of your hand, your votive offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock." (Deuteronomy 12:2-6)

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Chief among the idols of the nations that lived in the land at that time were Baal and Asherah (Asherim, Ashtaroth). After Joshua died, the people of Israel turned to idolatry.

"All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel. Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals, and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger. So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth." (Judges 2:10-13)

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Who (Or What) were Baal and Asherah?

Baal and Asherah were false gods worshiped by the ancient Phoenicians and Canaanites and others.

Baal was considered the primary male deity, known as the sun or the storm god.

Asherah was considered the primary female deity, known as the moon goddess, goddess of fertility.

The worship of Baal and Asherah involved sex and patterns of prostitution as a part of their religious rites.

After 40 years of wilderness wandering, the Israelites entered into a fertile land "flowing with milk and honey" and the inhabitants attributed their abundant harvests to their idol gods of the sun and moon, Baal and Asherah, to whom they offered worship through ritual prostitution.

Satan tempted the Israelites through lust and the promise of wealth and prosperity.

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Israelite men began engaging in sexual immorality with women from other nations and, in doing so, they were explicitly disobeying God's commands to keep themselves separate from those who worshiped idols.

"Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst. But rather, you are to tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and cut down their Asherim – for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God – otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons also to play the harlot with their gods. You shall make for yourself no molten gods." (Exodus 34:12-17)

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Ultimately, Satan is the source of all idolatry, deceiving people into believing there is more than one God. Idol worship is demon worship.

"Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons."

(1 Corinthians 10:14-21)

IDOLATRY

Idolatry, however, did not cease when the Old Law was nailed to the cross. We still must know what idolatry is and how it can overcome us today.

Idolatry (*eidololatreia*) is defined as:

"the worship of false gods" (Thayer, 174)

or

"image-worship" (Strong's Greek Lexicon).

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Many today may look on such ancient forms of idolatry as being extremely ignorant and naïve.

It seems difficult to imagine regarding a piece of wood, stone or any other physical matter with any sincere degree of reverence.

Even God's prophets mock the individual who takes a piece of wood and uses part of it to cook his dinner and warm himself, then uses the rest to carve a graven image to fall down and worship and seek deliverance.

(Psalms 115:1-8)

(Isaiah 44:9-20)

(Habakkuk 2:18-20)

(Isaiah 46:5-8)

(Jeremiah 10:3-5)

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We might be tempted to think that we are far too intelligent, sophisticated, and advanced in wisdom to ever be so foolish as to engage in idolatry.

Yet to think in such a manner is to miss the point of what idolatry really is.

Idolatry, then and now, is about man's unwillingness to submit to God's will and seeking a way to justify doing whatever he wants to do.

The fundamental error of idolatry is the worship of the created (primarily self) rather than the Creator.

Idolatry results from failing to acknowledge God's sovereign power and presence and failing to give Him the reverence and worship that is due Him.

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Idolatry today can present itself in several different fashions:

1. Image worship
2. Nature worship
3. Self worship
4. Wealth worship

IDOLATRY**Image Worship**

We should never attempt to exchange God for any type of man-made image.

Paul told the idolatrous Athenians,

"Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man." **(Acts 17:29)**

IDOLATRY**Image Worship**

Many so-called "Christian" denominations (Catholic and Protestant) in our world today consider various images of Mary, Peter, or the cross of Christ to be worthy of their reverence and worship. People bow before images and carved statues and offer prayers.

Many religions consider images of their so-called gods to be holy. The Buddhist religion (530 Million followers) claims 24 deities. The Hindu religion (1.2 Billion followers) claims thousands (or millions) of deities.

We need to be careful that we do not get caught up in this form of idolatry in which we offer the reverence due to God to a man-made object.

IDOLATRY**Nature Worship**

God intended for His creation to give evidence for His power and divinity and lead man towards giving honor and glory to Him.

*"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for **God made it evident to them**. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood **through what has been made**, so that they are without excuse."*

(Romans 1:18-20)

IDOLATRY**Nature Worship**

Instead, we read of those in the Old Testament who worshipped the sun, the moon, and the stars along with the likes of Baal and Asherah.

“Then the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the doorkeepers, to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels that were made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; and he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. He did away with the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had appointed to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah and in the surrounding area of Jerusalem, also those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and to the moon and to the constellations and to all the host of heaven.” (2 Kings 23:4-5)

IDOLATRY**Nature Worship**

Astrology is idolatry akin to the sin of sorcery, those who pretend they can declare the future based on the stars and constellations.

In Genesis 2:15, God declared that man was responsible to “cultivate” and “keep” the creation that He had made, but never to worship it.

In fact, God through Moses warned:

“And beware not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the Lord your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven.”

(Deuteronomy 4:19)

IDOLATRY**Self Worship**

Paul warned the church in Philippi:

*“For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, **whose god is their appetite**, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.”*

(Philippians 3:18-19)

We live in a society that propagates this form of idolatry very successfully. Everywhere we look and listen, the message is to satisfy your desires above anything else.

IDOLATRY**Self Worship**

Paul warned Timothy about those who would prioritize personal pleasure over pleasing God:

“But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; Avoid such men as these.” (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

IDOLATRY**Self Worship**

Paul warned the saints in Rome of those who are “slaves ... of their own appetites”

“Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.” (Romans 16:17-18)

To first satisfy self is simply idolatry.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.’” (Matthew 16:24)

IDOLATRY**Wealth Worship**

Idolatry is also defined in scripture as covetousness or greed. Paul told the church in Colossae:

“Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (“covetousness,” ASV and KJV), which amounts to idolatry.” (Colossians 3:5)

Vine’s Expository Dictionary defines the word “covetousness” or “greed” as simply “a desire to have more.”

“He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 5:10)

IDOLATRY**Wealth Worship**

When we develop an insatiable appetite for obtaining more and more, we are never content with what we have. Consider Paul's attitude:

"Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

(Philippians 4:11-13)

"Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you ...'" **(Hebrews 13:5)**

IDOLATRY**Wealth Worship**

The love of money becomes the downfall of many.

"But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." **(1 Timothy 6:9-10)**

"Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." **(1 Timothy 6:17-19)**

IDOLATRY**Wealth Worship**

Jesus recognized the temptation for wealth to become an idol. The choice is ours to make.

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." **(Matthew 6:24)**

If we practice greed in pursuit of wealth, we have become idolaters and will not inherit heaven.

"For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God." **(Ephesians 5:5)**

IDOLATRY**CONCLUSION**

We know that idolaters will be cast into hell. This is why Christians are told repeatedly in scripture to flee from idolatry.

*"Then He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost. He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son. But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and **idolaters** and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."* **(Revelation 21:6-8)**

IDOLATRY**CONCLUSION**

Idolatry has plagued God's people from the beginning, tempting them to want to be like those in the world, serving self instead of serving God.

Christians can become idolaters by letting anything other than God dictate and consume our time, our talents, our resources, and ultimately our hearts!

Let us flee from idolatry and dedicate our lives to love, to worship, and to serve the one God and His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

"One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' And He said to 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 great and foremost commandment.'" **(Matthew 22:35-38)**

HOW TO OBEY THE GOSPEL

Hear the word of God (2 Thessalonians 2:14-15; James 1:21)

Believe the gospel message (Hebrews 11:6; John 8:24)

Repent of sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30-31)

Confess Jesus Christ (Romans 10:10; Matthew 10:32-33)

Be Baptized (Galatians 3:26-27; Romans 6:3-4; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38)

Remain Obedient (Matthew 7:21; Revelation 2:10; Hebrews 3:12)