

Idols – 1 John 5:21

I. INTRODUCTION

A. 1 John 5:21

1. Jump out into the future about 40 minutes - you and a friend are having a nice conversation in the fellowship hall.
 - a. you're talking about what God's been doing in your lives.
 - b. then, as it's time to go, your friend begins to walk away.
 - c. when you're several paces apart, with other people still standing around talking -
 - d. that friend calls out your name and says,
 - e. "Oh, and by the way – make sure you don't shop-lift!"
 - f. you'd be shocked! You'd be flabbergasted!
 - g. and you'd be totally perplexed on *why* he/she said that.
2. As we read this parting shot from John, that's the kind of thing we're confronted with.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

3. This is an interesting way for John to close out his letter.
4. As we read the conclusion of the rest of the NT epistles we find the authors ending them with tender words of affection and greeting
 - a. they commend their readers to the grace of God
 - b. or they end with some final words of comfort
5. John seems to start that way when he begins, "Little children"
 - a. this is an affectionate and tender phrase that he's used several times in 1 John
 - b. but he follows it with words that quite frankly are a bit, well, to put it bluntly – scandalous!

B. Idols?

1. You see, it's clear he's addressing Christians – he calls them "children."
 - a. meaning of course, the *children of God!*
 - b. when John calls them "little" he doesn't use it as a criticism that they're spiritually immature.
 - c. it's a term of *endearment* and *affection*.
2. But then he tells them to avoid something that was as obvious as the difference between black and white.
3. And the very mention of it, because it's so obvious, would cause them to say, "What?"
 - a. "We don't worship idols!"
 - b. "We're Christians, not pagans. We put away idolatry long time ago."
4. But that's John's very point – the problem of idolatry is far more dangerous than we might think.
5. His readers may no longer be bowing down before some statue or visiting a pagan temple to worship Diana, or Zeus or Aphrodite –
6. But the problem of idols can linger in a more *subtle form*.
7. It's this *more subtle idolatry* that John is cautioning them about.
8. And this caution – penned almost 2000 years ago, echoes down the corridors of time to ring in our ears today.

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

II. IDOLS

A. The First Commandment

1. The very first of the *Ten Commandments* is a prohibition of worshipping other gods.
2. Exodus 20:2-3
- 2 “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ³You shall have no other gods before Me.”**
3. When we read this command, it’s easy to see it in it’s original setting and think,
 - a. this command was given when people were *backward and unsophisticated*
 - b. they worshipped idols and believed in many deities
 - c. but in our modern age, we’ve done away with the superstitious belief in all that.
 - d. now we worship *one* God – the Creator.
 - e. so this command was important for the *ancient* world, but it’s lost it’s moral edge for today.
4. Nothing could be further from the truth!
5. This command is as vital and relevant today as it was when it was first inscribed by the finger of God on Mt. Sinai!
6. For there are *more* gods today, not less!
 - a. there are more gods simply because there are *more* people
 - b. the deities God is referring to in the First Commandment aren’t merely statues carved from wood or stone that people bow down to.
 - c. they are anything that a man or woman gives their worship and devotion to that rightly belongs to God.
7. John calls believers to keep themselves from idols because he knows just how insidious idolatry is.
 - a. a person can go to church and even sing in the choir and still worship an idol.
 - b. a man can go to seminary, get a divinity degree and pastor a church of hundreds, and still be an idolater.

B. An Issue of the Heart

1. Idolatry is far more an *issue of the heart* than it is some pagan *ritual*.
2. An idol is anything that usurps the worship that is due only to God.
 - a. it’s anything that competes with and robs God of *our affection*.
 - b. an idol is whatever –
 - weakens our devotion,
 - saps our loyalty,
 - cools our passion,
 - drains our love
 - diminishes our commitment
 - and blurs our focus → on, to and for God.
3. The famous early church theologian Augustine wrote – “Idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be *used*, or *using* anything that is meant to be worshiped.”^[1]
4. Martin Luther said, “Idolatry is not only the adoration of images but also trust in one’s own righteousness, works and merits, and putting confidence in riches and power.”
5. Bill Gothard defines idolatry as “trusting people, possessions or positions to do for me what only God can do.”
6. One of my favorite authors was A.W. Tozer – He wrote, “The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of him.”
 - a. think about that for a moment
 - b. Tozer puts his finger squarely on the heart of what John is getting at here!
7. Sure Christians have forsaken the pagan practice of worshipping idols
 - a. but the problem of idolatry lingers on when we realize that it is entirely possible to have a faulty view of the true God.
 - b. that becomes an idol because it is a false god that a person claims allegiance to!

8. How many Christians today are in fact worshipping an idol because they've been told God exists to satisfy their desires for health and wealth?
 - a. they see God as much like a cosmic bellhop who comes running to their side when they ring the bell of prayer.
 - b. they think that God is bound by some *cosmic laws of faith* –
 - c. and if they just work the prayer-formula correctly; using the faith-container of words in just the right way – then God is bound to do whatever they ask.
9. Or how many Christians today think that God and Uncle Sam are the same guy?
 - a. how many church-goers think God is a Pro-Life Republican?
 - b. a Christian Reconstructionist?
 - c. or a Pro-choice liberal Democrat?
10. God is God and stands above all these things
 - a. He does not join a political party
 - b. and will not be made the patron of any of them!

C. *Jesus Is the True God*

1. V. 20 and 21 really go together –

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

2. According to v. 20 - who is the true God? Jesus Christ!
3. *This* is the God that we love, worship and serve!
4. But we must constantly check ourselves to ensure that some other god, some idol, has not usurped the place that belongs only to Jesus –
 - a. some more convenient deity.
 - b. some idol *less holy* and *more accommodating* of our baser desires and lusts.

D. *Many gods*

1. It seems it's the natural inclination of the human heart to *manufacture* lesser deities.
2. God made us in His image, and it seems that we've tried to return the favor, making Him into ours.
3. Michel Montaigne wrote – “O senseless man who cannot make a worm, and yet makes gods by the dozens.”
4. Oswald Chambers said, “Whenever we take what God has *done* and put it in the place of himself, we become idolators.”

E. *Spiritual Adultery*

1. In the OT, the Nation of Israel struggled greatly with the problem of idolatry.
2. What's troubling is the way that God refers to it – He calls it *adultery!*
3. He likened His relationship with them to marriage and said that Israel was His wife.
 - a. when they set up idols on every hill and in every glade and then went out to bow down to them –
 - b. God said she was committing adultery.
4. In the NT, the Church is called the *Bride of Christ*.
 - a. Paul says we have been betrothed to the Lord -
 - b. what we all await is the glorious Day when the Groom comes to take His Bride to the wedding feast in heaven!
5. But while we wait for the Groom to come—we must be careful we're not seduced by false lovers.
6. We must be like those wise virgins in Matthew 25 who kept their lamps trimmed and burning brightly as they waited for their Groom -
7. Not like those foolish virgins whose light went out because they failed to stoke their affection for

the Lord.

F. Competition

1. Little children, the Spirit says, keep yourselves from idols.
2. An idol is *anything* that competes with your affection for and devotion to Jesus.
3. Does this mean we're prohibited from having & *enjoying* hobbies?
 - a. does this mean affection for family and friends is a no-no?
 - b. are we barred from being passionate about anything but God?
4. Not at all! But what it *does* mean is that *all* passion, *all* love, *all* affection, devotion and loyalty must be an expression of our worship of God.
 - a. my job, my home, my play –
 - b. all these are the realms in which my affection for and devotion to God are lived out!
5. Whenever I find that my job or home or play COMPETES with God, then I must realize it's become an idol.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Like Them

1. In Psalm 115, we find an interesting test to determine who or what we really worship
2. in vs. 3-8 we read –
 - 3 **Our God *is* in heaven; He does whatever He pleases.**
 - 4 **Their idols *are* silver and gold, The work of men's hands.**
 - 5 **They have mouths, but they do not speak; Eyes they have, but they do not see;**
 - 6 **They have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell;**
 - 7 **They have hands, but they do not handle; Feet they have, but they do not walk; Nor do they mutter through their throat.**
3. Here's the test -
 - 8 **Those who make them are like them; So *is* everyone who trusts in them.**
4. It's a spiritual law that we become like that which we worship.
 - a. if we worship Jesus, then we'll become more like *Him*.
 - b. but if we worship an idol, we'll become more like *it*.
 - 1) since idols cannot speak then slowly but surely we will lose our ability to communicate
 - 2) because they cannot see, we'll lose the ability to perceive what's real
 - 3) because an idol cannot hear, we'll lose the ability to discern the truth
 - 4) and on it goes till we live a life that is little better than the animals
 - c. as we look at our culture, seemingly so sophisticated and savvy, we realize that in fact, what we see is a lot of people who are living at the level of mere brute beasts.
 - d. they live this way because they've rejected God and worship an idol.
 - e. not an idol in the fashion of some statue, but of something, ANYTHING other than God.
5. I like the way Edith Schaeffer puts it –
 - a. she said that when she was a little girl her mother would often say,
 - b. "Edith, I know who you've been playing with today."
 - c. she knew because Edith had become something like the other little girl, whichever one it was, enough like her that the girl could be identified by Edith's changed accent, mannerisms, and other subtle changes.
 - d. children often copy other children quite unconsciously.
 - e. so do adults – we're affected by the people we spend time with, in one way or another.

6. God makes clear to us that not only is it *sin* to serve idols, but that idolatry has a *dangerous effect* on us.
7. People who worship idols become *like* them.
8. And people who worship Christ become more like Him.

B. The Test

1. So let that be the test we each apply today as we come to grips with what John writes here in v. 21.
2. Who or what are you becoming more like?
 - a. are you growing in the fruit of the Spirit?
 - b. are you becoming more like Jesus?
 - c. is there more love, joy and peace – more patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?
 - d. or are the weeds growing faster than the fruit?
3. May God shine the searchlight of His Holy Spirit on our hearts and reveal if there is anything unworthy of Him there.
4. And if there is, may He give us the grace today, this moment, to cast down our idols.
5. PRAY

Precious Lord Jesus -
The dearest idol I have known,
Whatever that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne,
And worship only thee. ^[2]

^[1] Augustine, Leadership, Vol. 4, no. 4

^[2] William Cowper (1731-1800)