

“Naming Our Idols”

October 8, 2017

First series – Stewardship

If I’m honest, I don’t think about worshipping idols much at all. Probably we think about “American Idol” if we think about the word “idol” at all, but I want to thank Dirk for the gut punch that he gave me. His skit is funny, I know, but there’s so much truth in what we wrote and how we saw it portrayed today. Idol worship isn’t just a problem of the past, but it’s still with us. **SHOW SLIDE:**

The problem in ancient times: idol worship

The problem in modern times: idol worship

We’re focusing on putting God first in living and giving. Yes, this is the time of year when we focus more specifically on stewardship. But it’s not just about the financial pledge we’ll offer. This is about our priorities, how we order our lives, and how we worship God with our whole lives.

So what about idols? Maybe you don’t think about worshipping idols much either. Why focus on idols? You and I don’t stand around a statue and sing praises or bow down. We worship God who is with us, but whom we can’t contain or control.

And yet the struggle is real. Pastor Mike Slaughter offers a powerful (but convicting definition) of an idol: *anything or anyone that receives the energy and resources that should belong to God first.*

It’s not a new problem. We know what God told Moses and the Israelites: Don’t make for yourselves an idol, and God repeats it again. God specifically asks for an altar and sacrifices. God asks for worship, and right after God gives what we call the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, there are many other specific instructions about how the Israelites will organize themselves for worship down to the last detail.

It’s a bit later that Aaron, who has been named chief priest, falls to the desires of the people to worship in a way that goes against God’s desire and command. Who knows how long they grumbled? But Aaron gives in. They’re out of Egypt, and God has warned them not to be distracted.

God called them to worship faithfully, but after Moses is gone for a while, too long for them, they want God to be tangible. Maybe it’s a desire to control God, to make God more obvious, or even have more certainty about God. If we’re honest, it’s not too far off from how we feel sometimes.

Aaron tells them to use the gold they have, which came from what they took from the Egyptians, and he makes a statue of a calf. They end up worshipping this idol rather than worshipping God. They don’t have money as we think of it - dollars and cents - but it doesn’t matter. What we do with our money or resources shows what we

value. And the issue is that they were worshipping the gift rather than the Giver of the gift.

At the root of it, that's what idol worship is: we worship the gifts of God rather than God, the Giver of all that we have. We get distracted by things that dazzle us and promise to satisfy us rather than focusing on God who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of our lives.

How many of you know the verse from Proverbs 3: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." Even though we want to "trust in the Lord with all our heart," we don't trust in the Lord easily. Sometimes we separate the spiritual life from the rest of our lives, and we end with what's called "a divided heart."

And we know this wasn't the end for the Israelites or for us. We hear in II Kings that the generations after Moses and Aaron continued to worship idols. God continues to call us back to true worship because we continue to be distracted.

Perhaps we want to offer ourselves, as Paul says in Romans 12, as a living sacrifice, but we're so easily distracted. One minute we say, "Here I am, God, use me as you will" but the next minute, we're looking around at everything that can take our time and energy. We want to put God at the center of our lives, but it's very easy to put ourselves at the center and try to fit God around us. The call, though, is that God would be at the center.

Consider some modern-day idols. We heard some of them in our skit. Money or stuff can become what we worship. Many people live paycheck to paycheck - and for many reasons - but some of the struggle comes back to seeking things that will satisfy us. We view luxuries as essentials, and we want it all now! We make God the One who serves our materialistic tendencies and desires. How many of us have said, "I've worked hard. God would want me to have this!"

Food can become an idol if we're trying to satisfy deeper needs rather than using food as fuel and sustenance. When we're eating to feel better, then we're trying to fill a void with something else rather than seeking God.

Technology can create the same issue. The newest iPhone just came out. We may invest a lot of time and energy in keeping up with the newest and greatest and relying on our cell phone and our connections to give us self-worth and meaning rather than seeking it in a relationship with God.

Politics can become an idol. We tend to shape God in the image of our preferred ideology. We allow God to be bound by party rather than seeking God's will first. But God isn't Republican or Democrat or Libertarian or anything other human construction. We can't make God in our image, even though we try. We are made in God's image - not the other way around.

Naming our idols requires us to remember who we are. We are made in God's image and called to worship God with our lives. The truth is that we start to look like what we worship, so if we're not worshipping God, then we won't grow closer to God.

The journey of faith is sometimes up and down, to be sure, but the goal is always to follow God's leading. We want to become more Christ-like, but we struggle to keep our priorities in line.

And it's important to say that some of the idols we've lifted up aren't always a bad thing. Money, food, technology, political traditions, sports, and even family, friends, and relationships - all of them can be great gifts, but can become idols when we give them priority. They become idols when we worship them instead of God who gives those gifts to us.

How do our priorities get out of balance? What in our lives do we use to try to take God's place? We trust in idols to give us love and life, but ultimately, they don't satisfy. We want to find identity and meaning in our idols, but they'll let us down every time.

God asks for our trust. God is the One who gives us love and abundant life. We strive to be people of faith. God isn't something or someone we can control, box in, or limit. If we're striving for more and allowing ourselves to give energy to idols, then we may find ourselves focused on what we can get, what we can achieve, how we can advance and succeed, or how we benefit. Jesus' call to us is that we focus on how we can love God and love others with all that we are and all that we have. It's about what we can give - not what we can get.

When does it become about us and not about God? How do we change it? How do we trust in God and put God first? We start by naming those things that we worship in place of God. What demands our energy and focus? Even if it's a good thing, how do we keep it in its rightful place? How do we make God the center and worship God the Giver - not the gifts God gives?

When it comes to time and money, how do we use them? For our own gratification? Or to give God glory? Think about your calendar. Think about your checkbook. What do they say about where our heart is? These are difficult questions - and convicting questions. All of us struggle to keep our lives in line with God.

Idolatry affects the people around us. Our children may respond more to what we show we're passionate about - not simply what we say we believe. So we can talk about God and how important God is all day long, but if we don't show that we're passionate about God by how we live and the priority we place on our relationship with God, then we're in trouble with that divided heart. It's one thing to say we believe, but what does it look like to be fully committed to a relationship with God?

When we take the time to name our idols, we can begin to seek God's help to move them out of the center, to reprioritize them, or maybe - depending on what it is - replace them. We want to put God in the center and align our lives around God. May God help us! Let us pray...

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE