
Idol Worshipers in a Technological Society



Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor
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We live in the most technologically advanced time in history. There are more inventions and gadgets today than we have ever known.

My grandparents never owned a car, never flew in a plane, never had a telephone, and I don't mean a cell phone.

They believed that pot was something you cooked in. Grass grew on the ground, was not for smoking.

My parents never had a check book, never mind a credit card, paid cash for everything.

Recently when I was doing something to my model 35 mm camera my grandchildren were watching me and they said, what's that, and I said it's film, and they asked, what's film?

Also we live in a part of the world would consider itself more sophisticated than probably anywhere else on the planet.

So when you read a 3500 year old commandment from God about staying away from idols and the errors of idolatry, of all the commandments this seems to be the most irrelevant and impractical to us. We are just not into worshipping little statues and icons or so we think!

May I remind us, The Ten Commandments should not be read as slogans for self-improvement, nor instructions for personal piety, nor a spiritual aerobics program to win God's approval, nor a mandate for social reconstruction. They have a historical and a redemptive context, and they must be understood in the light of that context. They are given to people who are already redeemed, people touched by grace. They are the transcript of God's character about how redeemed people should live.

Yet even as we may understand that, this second word about avoiding idols perhaps more than any other word seems so out of place for us.

Let me begin with a story, Exodus 32:1-24. It took place a little while after Israel received these commandments from God. They should still have been fresh in their minds. Moses had gone back up the mountain to meet with God. The people became confused and assumed that they would never see him again. They appeal to Aaron and say, do something, so Aaron tells them to take off their jewelry, and they would fashion this into an idol. They do so, and the idol is in the shape of a golden calf. The people worship it, they dance around it, they

put it at the centre of their lives. They watch the glow of the flames, seeing themselves in its reflection mesmerizes them. Moses came back down, saw this and asked what was going on. Aaron said, we threw the jewelry into the fire and out jumped this golden calf. The story goes on to tell us that God was furious with them and made them grind up the tablets of stone, scattered in on the water and made the people drink it, but that story is for another time.

We cannot imagine people today sitting around an inanimate object and staring with excitement and fascination at flickering images and finding meaning and fulfillment in that, or can we?

In April 10th, 1939 at the World Fair in New York City, a new invention made its debut. *The New York Times* wrote about this new invention. They said with skepticism, the problem is that people are being asked to sit and just watch it. *The New York Times* wrote, the American people will not go for that and will not have the time for that. This new invention was called television.

We have become worshippers of our inventions. We worship what we have created.

We worship at the temple of the celebrity. We have made idols out of famous people. Charisma has become more important than character. A whole industry is built on their activity. Our society no longer has heroes. We only have stars.

We have become worshippers of a little white ball and some would sell their soul to get it into the little hole in the middle of the pretty green grass. If it is so hard, I ask, why not make the hole bigger?

We have become worshippers of beauty and health. It is a billion dollar industry. We are modern day followers of narcissus. This young man who fell in love with his own reflection. We have become worshippers of self.

You get my point. Idolatry is not about having little statues in our homes. It is about the condition of our heart before the one and only true God.

What is idolatry?

#1 Idolatry is about **an exchange**. It is about exchanging God for something that is not God. It is about taking God out of the centre of life and putting something else or someone else at the centre.

One example of this exchange is the way in which we worship the creation instead of the Creator.

Romans 1

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

We are called to be stewards of creation. This is not our just our larder to get food nor our sports arena in which to play. Creation is the landscape on which God has painted the world. Creation is the divine canvas on which God paints.

But when we put creation in the place of the creator and worship creation, when we give creation the rank of deity, which also means that we diminish and reduce God, we are committing idolatry.

Idolatry is about making something holy when it is not holy but ordinary, and then taking something that is holy and treating it as ordinary.

#2 Idolatry is about **exalting something** that is not God and making it God. It is lifting something up into the place of God and in doing so, we make God less. As we do that, we lower God and give him a second place.

#3 Idolatry is about **empowering something that is dead**, and giving it life. We breathe our human life into something that is inanimate and really lifeless and then we allow its fictitious life to rule over us. In the meantime, we take those things that have the breath of God and we treat them as though they were dead. God alone is the one who has and who gives the breath of life.

Idolatry is the many and different ways in which we diminish God. We make Him lesser and we shrink His position and as we do that, we take something that is peripheral and we make it central. We take what is dead and we make it come to life.

We can become idolatrous about anything. For example a style of worship (Anglican, Brethren, Baptist). We can become idolatrous about an issue and hold it like some

sacred object. We can become idol-worshippers of anything.

So perhaps we are more alike the children of Israel than we know, dancing round the golden calf. We too have committed idolatry in our culture.

Our culture has altered the external face of idolatry. For the most part we have moved from something material to something mental. The face of idolatry has moved from the external to the internal. But that does not alter its seductive nature. The force of idolatry lies in the power given to something by our imagination. It is the mind and the power of the imagination that gives idolatry its force, and in return idolatry uses its power over the very minds that give it life.

The Book of Isaiah asks,

To whom then will you liken God?

Or what likeness will you compare with Him?

As for the idol a craftsman casts it

A goldsmith plates it with gold

And a silversmith fashions it with chains of silver

He who is too impoverished (too poor) for such an offering selects a tree that does not rot. (i.e. he uses wood)

Idolatry distorts our understanding of God and so it misleads people. The misdirection comes from the fact that it begins with a human point of origin rather than God and this is precisely what is always wrong with image-making.

Our image of God is being created by our imagination and is therefore limited by that same imagination.

The god who is made by our minds is too small, too localized. He is a person-sized God, a god who is made in our image whom we will try to control.

So to think wrongly about God means that in essence we think wrongly about everything else.

To think rightly about God, right at the beginning, is an important step towards thinking rightly about everything else.

At the heart of each commandment is a part of God's nature. This commandment tells us why it is so clear and specific. It says that He is a jealous God. This is a way of describing God that we may not think about.

Deuteronomy 4:23-24

23 Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol

in the form of anything the LORD your God has forbidden.

24 For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

When we use the word 'jealous' in English, we usually are using it in a negative way. Being jealous means that we hold on to something. We will not share it with other people. Having a jealous nature is usually regarded as a negative trait or quality.

But the word 'jealous' is actually a neutral word. It can be both positive and negative. While we may often use it in a negative context, it also has a positive side. We can say that we love our children so much that we jealously guard their safety. We would do anything to protect them. We want the best for them. We jealously love our spouse, meaning that we will not allow anything or anyone to interfere in our relationship to come between us.

Positive jealousy is protective, it shields, it defends, it holds us close to its heart.

Jealous love does not give equal time to other contenders. Jealous love is not about equal opportunity. Jealous love does not make room for rivals. Jealous love does not accept competition. Jealous love will not accept second place.

In one place Paul writes, *I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy*. That is the kind of love God has for His people, for us as His redeemed nation. It is crucial that we understand His heartbeat towards us. That is the heart and core of this commandment. Jealous love runs hot because this holy God has a divine passion for us.

The more we become aware of this divine envy for our life and allow this jealous love of God to touch our life, to sear our soul, to burn its way into our heart, the more we will be changed.

God's jealous love was costly for him. It sent His son to the cross. The Father let go the one who shared his essence, who shared the glory of heaven. It cost the Father the presence of the son. This divine jealousy, this godly envy for us meant that the Father somehow felt the pain of sin in this divine exchange.

There are so many lines of thought in this. This past week my mind was being pulled in so many different ways, I had more ideas and outlines than I ever thought possible. I have distilled it down to one core issue, one basic question.

AM I WILLING TO IDENTIFY AND REMOVE ANYTHING IN MY LIFE THAT PREVENTS ME FROM BEING TOUCHED BY THIS DIVINE JEALOUSY?

When we get too busy or have spent too much money or we feel some pressure demanding change, most of us most of the time do not really change, we simply re-arrange the furniture in our lives until the pressure goes away and then we return to business as usual. We are like rubber bands, as soon as you let them go they return to where they were.

Divine jealousy is not prepared to settle for simple re-arrangement of the furniture, nor some basic re-organization of the pieces of our lives. Divine jealousy asks, it demands, nothing less than the renovation of our lives and for most of us that may be more costly and upsetting than we realise.

Deuteronomy 7, this is not an easy story and one we can easily struggle with.

1 When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations-- the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you--

2 and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy.

3 Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons,

4 for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

5 This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.

6 For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

7 The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

Israel is told to clear the land. The people are instructed to clear out the symbols of polytheistic religions, to destroy the images of false deities that were often crude and sexual, to take away the potential and opportunity of inter-marriage because of this divine jealousy.

There is a new landscape to be established as they worship the one and only God.

This passage is not telling us to go out and rent bulldozers and destroy some of Vancouver to create a nice Christian neighborhood where we write Bible verses on the walls instead of gang symbols and graffiti. Rather the landscape we are called to clear is the landscape of our minds. It is the landscape within us, what Gerald Manley Hopkins calls **INSCAPE**.

Where we need to clear the land is in the landscape of our minds, what we think about, what we dream about. It is the landscape of the heart needs cleared and cleaned.

This is what Jesus teaches us:

Mark 7

21 For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery,

22 greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.

23 All these evils come from inside

Authentic Christianity is not about improving our values or re-shuffling our priorities or re-aligning our goals. These are merely cosmetic changes. This divine jealousy calls for a

renovation of the heart and this will usually mean that we clear the landscape of our minds where we have built ideas with material stronger than concrete. It is where we have basements in our souls that we would not want anyone to see because they are full of garbage. The real environmental clean up is inside. The toxic waste dump is in our minds and hearts.

Here is a dimension of clearing the land we need to think deeply about. It does not only mean clearing the land that may already be filled with moral rubble. It also means that we clear the land before we even move on it. Have you ever thought that clearing the land also involves identifying and removing obstacles that are a potential threat to our lives? This means that a carefully cultivated heart and life will be able to foresee and forestall situations before they come.

There are problems and difficulties that should simply not come to Christians, not because we are better than anyone else, but because we clear the land before we get there. We anticipate problems and we clear them out of the way before we get there.

We should have the insight to see the potential of evil before we get there and do not fall unsuspecting into its trap.

When we clear this inner landscape and remove potential obstacles, we are keeping our lives free for God and ourselves for the days ahead.

One of the realities of life for many of us is a mortgage, when we sign a mortgage, we are committing our future. Yet more expensive than the mortgage on a house is when some young person perhaps in a thoughtless decision, mortgages their future, physically, emotionally, spiritually, perhaps in a sexual relationship that is wrong right from the start.

The greatest gift of freedom we can give God and ourselves is to clear the land in our lives, keep our lives free from junk.

This kind of work is not easy. We avoid it more than we know. It can create conflict and struggle within us, yet it is the most important work we can do. This divine jealousy asks us to have the holy courage to clear the landscape within us even where we have not yet walked, so that we walk in the land as God's holy people.

God is a jealous lover. His love for us runs hot, so hot that He is not willing to co-exist with other gods or any kind of idol. He will not tolerate any competition.

He is not willing to accept anything else that competes with His love. He is not willing to accept any rivalry for his love. That is the intense nature of divine jealousy.

Let me give you an idea, a dangerous idea if you really think about it. God is so unwilling to be second in our life, that if He cannot be the first and the only, He may withdraw from us and leave us alone to live out our decision, to accept the consequences of our actions. Remember what we sow we reap. He is simply unwilling to negotiate for second place in our lives.

Where does an idea like that come from?

I take that idea from the story of the rich young ruler who asked Jesus, what do I have to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus tells him about the commandments and he replies that he has kept them all since I was a boy, so Jesus says, sell everything you have and come follow me, and it says that he went away sad. What was at stake for him had eternal significance. That was not a question about lifestyle, or values, it was a question about life.

Apparently the cost of renovating his life and clearing the landscape of his heart was too much. But there was no

negotiation, no arbitration, no compromise, no concession.

God is so unwilling to be second in our life, that if He cannot be the first and the only, He may leave us alone to our decision. He is simply unwilling to negotiate for second place in our lives.

If He cannot be first, he is prepared to wait until we come to that place in our lives when we are ready to invite Him to be first. He will wait until we have dealt with the idols we have set up in our lives. He will wait until we clear the land within us.

Let me ask you the core question again.

AM I WILLING TO IDENTIFY AND TEAR DOWN ANYTHING? ANYTHING IN MY LIFE THAT PREVENTS ME FROM BEING TOUCHED BY THE JEALOUS LOVE OF GOD?

What have I made into an idol, exchanging the glory of God to worship something else?

We can exchange it back and put God in his rightful place.

What have I exalted in my life beyond its importance and measure and have made it like god?

We can take whatever it is off its pedestal and put God back at the top of the list.

What have I breathed life into and given it life when God alone is our breath and is the life-giver?

We can fill our lungs afresh with the breath of God.

Can you imagine what our lives would be like if we cleared that land within us of the rubble and the mess and felt the divine passion of God flow is us?