

## Idolatry

**You shall not make for yourself a carved image, any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth, you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. Exodus 20:4**

From the beginning, God's covenant with Israel was based on exclusive worship of Him alone (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7). The Israelites were not even to mention the names of false gods (Exodus 23:13) because to do so would acknowledge their existence and give credence to their power and influence over the people. Israel was forbidden to intermarry with other cultures who embraced false gods, because God knew this would lead to compromise. The book of Hosea uses the imagery of adultery to describe Israel's continual chasing after other gods, like an unfaithful wife chases after other men. The history of Israel is a sad chronicle of idol worship, punishment, restoration and forgiveness, followed by a return to idolatry. The books of 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles reveal this destructive pattern. The Old Testament prophets endlessly prophesied dire consequences for Israel if they continued in their idolatry. Mostly, they were ignored until it was too late and God's wrath against idol-worship was poured out on the nation. But ours is a merciful God, and He never failed to forgive and restore them when they repented and sought His forgiveness.

But if idols are merely impotent blocks of stone or wood, and their power exists only in the minds of the worshipers, then this should be an easy commandment to follow, right? All you need to do is throw away the golden calf on the shelf, the wooden statues, and crystals, and that's one commandment ticked off the list.

However, idolatry extends beyond the worship of idols and images and false gods. Our modern idols are many and varied. Even for those who do not bow physically before a statue, idolatry is a matter of the heart—pride, self-centeredness, greed, gluttony, a love for possessions and ultimately rebellion against God. Is it any wonder that God hates it? Idol-worship robs God of the glory that is rightfully His, and that is something He will not tolerate (Isaiah 42:8).

Once you understand the seriousness that God places on this, and the worldly things the enemy uses to create a barrier between you and God, it may mean a little bit of lifestyle housekeeping is needed! Firstly, to remove the clutter, and then to tidy up by re-ordering things in terms of priority. But where do we start? If Idolatry is 'misplaced devotion that we react to if someone challenges or attacks it', then the question is, what can't we live without? When the rich young man asked Jesus what he needed to do to have eternal life (Matthew 19:16-24), he went away "sorrowful" when Jesus said, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Jesus could see the man's heart - he had a lot to lose in the world, yet so much more to gain in eternity! Wealth was his idol. So, how much of the world are we all willing to give up?

Anything at all that is placed between you and God is an idol, not just possessions, but activities and people too. Do you wake up and reach for the phone or for the Bible? Social media is an incredible tool of the Devil. Not only is it a distraction from putting God first, but it also provides lots of opportunities to sin by promoting, encouraging and glorifying self-idolatry, self-righteousness, anger, boastfulness, lewdness, and so on. Do you spend too much time watching and obsessing about sport, fretting about the latest news, listening to secular music, watching T.V., etc? 'Rabbit holes', too, can become idols if we obsess about the latest conspiracy and trying to persuade others to accept unorthodox ideas. If we need to know something, shouldn't we trust God to lead us to it? Even children have become idols in many families, and the result is a breakdown of the family structure ordained by God.

Of course, God knows we must live in, and negotiate a path through, this fallen world, and He knows our hearts. We can still do 'worldly' things, many of which are necessities, such as paying the bills and working, or enjoyable things, such as keeping fit and eating out. But we must make sure their place and priority in our lives is correct. We can't all disappear to a place of complete isolation to worship 24/7. But God demands to be at the centre, and He demands to be first. God wants a relationship with us, but it must be exclusive and not in

competition with idols. This may involve sacrifice on our part, but how miniscule is that in comparison to the sacrifice of Jesus?

“But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”. (Matthew 6:33)