



IDOLATRY, THEN AND NOW

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In the history of God's chosen people, Israel, idolatry has been the single greatest lure away from serving the Living God. The pagan nations around them worshipped and served various gods, whom they represented with carvings or statues or images, because they would not (or could not) worship what they could not see.

The unwitting result of this practice was that God was always reduced to a finite presence that was the work of human minds and hands.

Romans 1:22 *Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.* ²³ *And instead of worshipping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like **mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.***

The more apparent result was the aggravation of human pride (of possession) and aggression (competition). So, their gods, whom they worshipped, were merely images of themselves and their own traits and desires—and therefore limited to their experience and imagination. For this reason, God forbade His people to make or worship such idols.

As the Roman Catholic church took up the veneration of saints, many were represented by statues, carvings, paintings, and stained glass. The Protestant reformers regarded the prayers before these images as idolatry, and the common association with statuary came to define this sin against the Living God—yet, that was only one of its many forms (perhaps only the most apparent).

The arrival of the Living God in human form—Jesus, our Savior—turned a spotlight on the idolatrous behaviors of humanity, far beyond the worship of statues.

His well-known sayings, *“Your ancestors taught you... but I tell you now...”* illuminated the wide variety of ways in which we had turned all religion into an idolatry of sorts—narrowing God's image in human life to rigid rule-keeping and ritual behaviors, instead of responsive relationship to the Holy Spirit.

So, also, said the apostles of Christ, teaching us from Israel's failures:

1 Corinthians 10:1 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they were all drinking from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. ⁵ But God was not pleased with most of them, for they were cut down in the wilderness.

*⁶ These things happened **as examples for us**, so that we will not crave evil things as they did.*

*⁷ So **do not be idolaters**, as some of them were. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” ⁸ And let us not be immoral, as some of them were, and twenty-three thousand died in a single day. ⁹ And let us not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not complain, as some of them did, and were killed by the destroying angel.*

*¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written **for our instruction**, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹² So let the one who thinks he is standing be careful that he does not fall. ¹³ No trial has overtaken you that is not faced by others. And God is faithful: He will not let you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial will also provide a way out so that you may be able to endure it.*

Many are familiar with the final verse of the above passage as a hopeful message about the ever-present help of God, but the context shows that the promise is related to the ever-present temptation to idolatry.

What is it that turns a faithful heart towards idolatry? Apostle Paul nailed it in this passage: **trials that make us feel like we are stuck**—when no one else could understand our struggle, and God seems unwilling or unable to help us. Then, our minds go to work to construct an imaginary helper—one with the powers of a god, but under our control, so that we can command his aid. That is an idol—a god of my own making.

The apostles of Christ continued to hammer on the old ways of so-called godliness, that, lacking the life and breath of the Spirit, were hollow shells of formality. For example, consider these words of Paul to the Colossian church:

*Colossians 3:5 Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, **which amounts to idolatry.***

“Immorality” comes from the Greek, *pōrnēia*, (from which we derive our word “pornography”) which includes all illicit sexual desire and practice.

The other snares listed include anything that defiles the conscience, or stirs inordinate affections, or longs for what is forbidden, or coveting what belongs to someone else.

Colossians 3:8 But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another.

In addition to the well-known vices first listed, Paul expands the watchlist to include anger (mental or imagined violence against another), wrath (indignant behavior or speech), malice (mean-spirited behavior), slander (blasphemous speech), abusive speech (filthy speech and cursing), and lying (deceptive speech).

In contrast to all these, Paul offered this:

Colossians 3:12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; ¹³ bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you.

“Compassion” translates a word that refers to the intestines, in the way that they are gripped (tightened) when you feel deep pity for someone’s need.

“Kindness” comes from a word that stresses the *usefulness* of one’s deeds; helpfulness.

“Humility” refers to humbleness of mind; the opposite of proud thoughts.

“Gentleness” means agreeableness; non-rebellion.

“Patience” is longsuffering, which simply describes enduring suffering that lasts for a long time.

“Bearing with one another” describes putting up with or patiently enduring contradiction.

“Forgiving one another” translates a word that emphasizes showing favor by freely releasing one whom you have held for judgment.

¹⁴ Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

The “love” which binds us together in unity is our selfless service of one another.

As a result of these pursuits, the “peace of Christ” will rule in our hearts. This word, peace, means “joining together” or reconciling. This is the way of the true Christian brotherhood.

Supporting and guiding these behaviors is the “Word of Christ,” Christ’s teachings, the message of the Gospel.

When His words and His peace rule among us, we respond with singing, as naturally as a child claps her hands or skips for joy. Singing is characteristic (or should be) of Christian fellowships.

In contrast to idolatry (empty ritualistic religion), followers of Jesus are to engage directly with God and one another in such expressions of grace as these. To what end? Where does this all lead us?

Look again at this final passage:

*¹⁴ Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be **thankful**. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with **thankfulness** in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, **giving thanks** through Him to God the Father.*

Recognizing the favor we’ve been shown and expressing gratitude to God together for it is the appropriate response of a believing community, whether it is done formally (through song, holy communion, prayers, or the reading of Scripture) or informally and personally

The whole aim of the Gospel may be summed up in this way! It’s less about changing world systems (though they *will* be changed along the way), and more about changing our own hearts—to recognize the favor we’ve been shown, and express our gratitude to God for it. *This response to the Spirit releases more power and grace than a hundred prayers for change.*