

A WARNING AGAINST IDOLATRY

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 12-15
1 John 5:21

Good Morning!

What a pleasure it is for me to preach for you again this morning. Thank you, Pastor Matt!

Happy Father's Day!

I realize I should have probably picked a message more in line with the special day that this is – Father's Day; but to be honest with you, that's not the message that's been percolating within me. There's been a weight on me over the past several months that deeply troubles me. I've been chewing it repeatedly, and after being asked to preach today, I decided that this is what God was leading me to speak to instead.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: it's a dangerous thing to pick a topic and then use Scripture to back it up. The danger, obviously, is in misusing Scripture to make your point. At root it's "eisegesis" – reading into Scripture what you want it to say, rather than reading Scripture and expounding it for what it actually says, that is, "exegesis".

I trust each of you will be good Bereans and test what I say against what the Bible teaches to see for yourself if what I say is in line with it. I believe I am, and that is my intent; but I'm asking you to do your part.

Why?

Because this is a serious matter. Actually, it's a really serious matter. And not one of us is immune from it.

It affects everything we do – both public and private. It infects every relationship we have – family, friends, coworkers. And it distorts our private thoughts and our conscience. It's a profoundly deep, impactful, and deceptive sin.

I'm talking about idolatry.

And we all know the Bible addresses this topic repeatedly, don't we? From cover to cover.

But do we take it lightly? Do we gloss over its deceptiveness in our own hearts? Do we realize just how quickly we lean into it and practice it?

It's not a small thing to God and it should never be or become a small thing to us.

I also want to make a confession: I'm weird. And, yes, I'm okay with you thinking that about me, too. But why "weird"?

Take a moment and think about what your favorite book in the Old Testament is. What would you say?

[Solicit congregational feedback] ... Psalms? Proverbs? Genesis?

Well, one of my favorite books in the Old Testament is the book of Deuteronomy. Like I said ... I'm weird.

I try to listen to the Bible – or a podcast from a godly teacher – on my drive to work. And every time I listen through the Book of Deuteronomy, I'm reminded afresh of how serious God is about idolatry – within the household of faith – among the people of God. The last time I did it, the refrain "you must purge the evil from among you" rang loud and clear – much like a fire alarm – over and over again.

That's what I've been chewing over.

And, yes, while that refrain refers to particular individuals engaged in idolatry, it's something that needs to be examined in the deeper context. Because idolatry is not restricted to merely the crass bowing down to and worshiping of created objects. No, idolatry shows itself in many forms and is practiced in many ways. And that's what I want to look at with you in next 20-30 minutes or so.

Hear now the reading of the Word of Almighty God:

After the giving of the 10 Commandments, Moses tells the people:

Deuteronomy 6:1-9, 12-15

And then in the NT, John concludes his first letter by saying:

"Dear children, keep yourself from idols"

1 John 5:21

The Word of God, for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, to Whom all hearts are open,
All desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit,
So that we may perfectly love You
And worthily magnify Your Holy Name,

Through Christ our Lord.
Amen

We all know that the topic of idolatry could be taken in numerous ways. We could focus on politics, money, sex, personal power, or musical and sports idols. We could dig deep on the heightened emotional topic of the day that's shoved in our faces in the news or on social media ... the reaction for against Covid ... abortion ... gender identity ... or maybe inflation and the economy.

The idolatry I want to look at today, though, is the idolatry that we in the church – you and I – engage in one way or another.

Well, what exactly is idolatry?

In its simplest definition, it's the worship of an idol, a false god.

“Idol” – a false god, or a carved image of some form intended to represent the one true God

“Latria” (L) – worship, homage, adoration that is ascribed to _____

And the Bible, essentially from cover to cover warns us that “latria” – authentic worship – is to be reserved exclusively for Almighty God alone. For it to be ascribed in any manner to anything other than Almighty God is nothing less than idolatry.

We all know that.

And when we look at the world all around us, we see it in full splendor, don't we? Perverting the way of things as established by God.

- The upending of right and wrong: right is wrong and wrong is right
- The state rewarding those who do evil and punishing those who stand against it ... for example, the southern border, defunding the police
- Butchering children in the womb through abortion
- Marriage is now no longer just between a man and a woman – if you can even define a man or a woman anymore! People are even marrying non-human things...and, yes, it's a real thing. Just do a simple Google search of “woman marries” or “man marries” and see what you find...no joke: “woman marries bridge”, “man marries doll”, “woman marries and divorces herself”, you name it!
- Sexual perversion is celebrated and to say anything against it is to risk losing your job or worse
- Drag queens are invited to speak to children at elementary school or at the public library
- Carving up kids over feelings of gender identity. Surgically converting boys into girls and girls into boys. Kids!

We live in extreme times now, don't we? And you don't need to be a rocket scientist to know that the push to normalize this behavior is not going to stop. Indeed, anyone who dares to speak up against it is marginalized and reviled – especially on social media – and even punished by one's employer or by the State.

This month is "Pride month", as we all know, and yes, a particular sin is in view, but really, it's sin itself – regardless of the specific one – that's really being paraded around. An entire month now formally dedicated to thrusting the middle finger directly in the face of God. With the full force of meaning behind that middle finger.

But that's the world we live in. And God's dealing with it as He sees fit.

Just read Romans 1:18 to the end of the chapter ... we see it being lived out in front of us. Three times the text basically says: you refuse to acknowledge Me, you're going to exchange my truth for a lie? Fine, you want your sin so bad, you can have it.

God just gives people over to their sin, culminating in a depraved mind, inventing ways of doing evil.

Dead in sin and trespasses. Which at one time, so were we.

Again, that's the world we live in. Full of crass idolatry – not necessarily a carved object, but most definitely an intense, powerful love for anything but the God Who is.

But the push to force this into the church is also very real. And the temptation to capitulate to it is also very real.

That's where I was connecting the refrain in Deuteronomy with this push.

"You must purge the evil from among you!"

The greatest threat to the Israelites in the Old Testament was not the armies of the neighboring regions. No, their greatest threat was the false prophet. The one within their midst who would lead people away from Almighty God and into the worship of Baal, Molech, Asherah, and so on. The one leading people away from the one true God.

Jeremiah had a tough time dealing with that, didn't he? All around him, the false prophets were telling the itchy ears of the people " 'Peace, peace'. When there is no peace." (Jeremiah 6 and 8). When the true message given to Jeremiah was one of doom and gloom for the people.

And it's no different today. The greatest threat we face in the church is not the government; it's not guns; it's not even the perverse sexualization of our culture. No, our greatest threat is the false teacher, the pastor, the elder, the leaders in the church who are leading people away from the one true God to worship something that isn't.

To scratch the people's itching ears.

The Bible tells us that teachers will be judged more strictly. And as an elder, as a teacher, as an occasional preaching elder, I take that very seriously.

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” *James 3:1 (ESV)*

By the way, note that this does not say we'll held to a higher standard. We hear it that way all the time, don't we? But that's not what it says. The standard of righteousness hasn't changed. We will be judged more strictly against the one and only standard that is God's perfect righteousness.

Yet we have churches across North America, indeed denominations, that affirm the call of “Pride month”. In the name of inclusivity, relevance, and love.

In other words, all are welcome, and please, whatever you do, don't ever think you need to repent. After all, God loves you just as you are and has a wonderful plan for your life, full of happiness and joy. You don't need to make any changes in the way you live at all ... God understands and loves you unconditionally.

Is that the message of the Scripture?

No! But that is the message of some churches. Of some pastors. Of some teachers.

I realize I'm exposing myself to harsh criticism. A charge of being unloving, uncaring, insensitive, judgmental, bigoted, and all the rest.

But I'm not here to scratch itching ears.

Because as the people of God, we **need** to look at the idolatry in our lives and face up to it.

Back in our text in Deuteronomy, it says:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”, Dt 6:4,

The Jewish Shema, repeated by Jesus in the New Testament is the greatest of all commandments.

Let me ask you – how many of you have loved the LORD our God with every fiber your being, with the entirety of your mind, your will, your physical strength, your very soul, for the last 5 minutes?

Does Psalm 63 define you at every waking moment?

O God, you are my God,
Earnestly I seek you;
My soul thirsts for you,
My body longs for you ... Psalm 63:1

Think of it, though ... if the greatest of all commandments is to love God with ALL of our heart, ALL of our soul, ALL of our mind and ALL of our strength, then surely – by resistless logic – the greatest of all sins is the failure to do that.

Do we grasp that?

If we're not loving our God in this way, we certainly ARE loving something else. And loving anything more than Almighty God is to engage in idolatry.

Which is why immediately after being given the Shema, we're told, beginning in verse 12 in our text:

“...be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. Fear the LORD your God, serve him only ... Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you; for the LORD your God, who is among you, is a jealous God, and he will destroy you from the face of the land.” ... Deuteronomy 6:12-15

But the thing that scares me the most is the speed at which we, within the church, do it.

Consider this...

When God delivered the 10 Commandments, He did so verbally to all the people. Several times in Chapters 4 and 5 of Deuteronomy – read it for yourself later – you read that “you heard his words from out of the fire”, for example:

Deut 5:22 ... [after delivering the 10 commandments] ... These are the commandments the LORD proclaimed in a loud voice to your whole assembly there on the mountain from out of the fire, the cloud and the deep darkness; and he added nothing more.

Picture that!

The entire assembly of the people are assembled at the mountain and suddenly, out of the fire, every last one of them heard God speak:

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God...”

...And so on...

And after hearing God speak, the people are literally scared to death – wouldn't you be? Seriously, what do you think your reaction would have been to hearing God speak audibly to the entire assembly at the foot of the mountain? I dare say a change of underwear might be in order...

The people couldn't stand it, so they asked Moses to go and listen to God and then pass on to them God's message and they would listen and obey. (Deut 5:25-27). God was pleased with that response and spoke only to Moses from then on.

Listen to what Moses tells the people in Exodus 20:20-23:

“Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.” Ex 20:20

“Then the LORD said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites this: ‘You have seen for yourselves that I have spoken to you from heaven: Do not make any gods to be alongside me; do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold.’ ” ”

The LORD then gave Moses various commandments, decrees and laws for the people that began to expound the 10 Commandments, beginning with the greatest of all commandments – the Jewish Shema – followed by the outworking of the Royal Law, of loving your neighbor as yourself, in Exodus 21-23.

And then in Exodus 24, Moses was called up on the mountain and was there for 40 days and 40 nights.

After which, God told Moses that the people had created a golden calf for themselves.

40 days.

Literally hearing the voice of God out loud, and 40 days later the golden calf.

Whether it was intended to help worship the true God or not, it was a clear violation of the second commandment.

40 days!

That's who I am. That's who you are. Because we all fall into believing the Devil's lie: “Did God really say...?”

And then we follow it up by acting it out to God, in essence, saying: “My way, not yours!”

Do we really appreciate the fact that every sin we commit – every last one of them – is an act of grotesque and colossal idolatry?

Sadly, the Israelites repeatedly slid into idolatry. And God repeatedly called them out on it. The biblical language is very strong on this, too. Ad nauseum, the bible repeatedly tells us that God called the Israelites “whores”, “prostitutes”, “adulterers”:

- Ezekiel 6:9 ... how I have been broken over their whoring heart...
- Ezekiel 16:28 ... you played the whore also with the Assyrians...
- Ezekiel 23:30 ... you played the whore with the nations and defiled yourself ...
- Ezekiel 23:31 ... sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they whore...

- Judges 2:17 ... they whored after other gods and bowed down to them
- Judges 8:27 ... Israel turned again and whored after the Baals...
- Jeremiah 3:9 ... because she took her whoredom lightly, she polluted the land...
- Jeremiah 13:27 ... abominations, your adulteries and neighings, your lewd whoring...He has seen you go after pagan gods on the hills...
- Exodus 34:15 ... and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods...
- Deuteronomy 31:16 ... this people will rise and whore after the foreign gods among them...
- Leviticus 20:5-6 ... all who follow him in whoring after Molech ... mediums and necromancers, whoring after them...
- Hosea 2:5 ... their mother has played the whore ...
- Hosea 4:14 ... men are doing the same thing, sinning with whores ...
- Psalm 106:39 ... became unclean by their acts, and played the whore in their deeds ...
- 1 Chronicles 5:25 ... they were unfaithful to the God of their fathers, and whored after the gods of the peoples of the land...

Why such strong language?

Because “whoring after an idol or foreign gods” is unfaithfulness to God, just as adultery is unfaithfulness to a spouse. It’s as self-debasing and depraved as selling your own body for somebody else’s sexual use.

Why is God so offended by it, though?

Really ... how many of us, to one degree or another, seem to think God’s over-reacting even just a little bit?

I mean it’s not like we have graven images at a shrine in our homes, right? We don’t go around literally bowing down to idols, do we?

We go to church. We pay our taxes, we do our civic duties, we work...and so on. We’re doing the right things. We stand against injustices and support many noble causes, and we certainly don’t go around pillaging, raping, and murdering our neighbors.

Yet, God calls His people whores, prostitutes, and adulterers over their idolatry.

Again, why is God so offended by it?

Because God is Holy. He is gloriously perfect in His entire being. He is perfectly righteous. He is Holy.

And we are not.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”, Dt 6:4,

With every fiber of our being, we are to love God. But we don't.

Consider this, though – and think it through deeply...

The Bible tells us that God is so loving that, metaphorically speaking, God IS love. God's love is so perfect, so complete, so Holy, that “God is love” (1 John 4:16).

Well, what is the supreme object of God's love?

We know God loves us so much that He did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We'll come to that in a minute.

But does that mean God loves us – you, me, all of humanity – past, present, and future – above all else?

Think about it.

We are creatures.

Again, what is the supreme object of God's love?

The answer is obvious, is it not?

God Himself MUST be the supreme object of His own love. Otherwise, He would be loving and worshiping something He created more than Himself. And for God to do that, HE would be engaged in idolatry: worshiping, and loving something other than God.

God absolutely MUST love Himself with every fiber of His Being, or He would be an idolator.

That's what it means when the bible tells us that God seeks after His own glory, that He will share it with nobody.

It may be hard to swallow, but there's nothing selfish about that. It simply must be. He MUST love Himself with everything that is in Him.

And as creatures made in the Image of God, it's understandable why – isn't it? – that in our deceptive sinfulness, our love is so thoroughly self-directed.

But for us to love ourselves that way is the epitome of idolatry. Not so with God. He simply CANNOT love and worship anything in all creation more than Himself without being an idolator.

God is Holy. He is Perfect. He is Just. He is Love. He is Almighty God.

That's why God gets so offended by our idolatry. We're taking what properly belongs to Him – our love and worship – and giving it to something else, primarily ourselves.

“My way, not yours!”

But so often, it's the subtlety of it that we miss...yet we do it all the time.

As I mentioned a previous time, just think of a smorgasbord restaurant. Walking up and down the aisles, picking and choosing the food we want, and passing on the ones we don't.

We do the same thing with God and His attributes:

- God's love ... sure, a nice big helping of that...
- God's omniscience ... sure, a dollop of this...
- God's graciousness ... yep, a double helping of that...
- God's kindness ... well, duh!
- God's wrath ... er, no! Eww!
- God's sovereignty ... sure, but not over my free will, so keep the gravy...
- God's holiness ... fine, just a sprinkling to season things a bit, though...
- God's electing a people for himself ... whoa! Allergy alert!!

We do that, folks!

And what we walk away with is an idol – a god we've constructed; our imagined idea of who we want God to be, stripping Him of the attributes we don't like and doubling up on those we do.

Making Almighty God into our little god. And the degree to which we do that – whether large or small – we're practicing idolatry.

And God simply won't have it.

So how do we combat it?

Well, there's only one way. And that's to submit ourselves to the Scriptures. To read them regularly and deeply, trusting that as we do that, the LORD will reach deep inside of us to accomplish what He desires, transforming us from the inside out, to reshape our vision of Him:

“...so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” ... Isaiah 55:11

And when we come face-to-face with the sin in our life, the sin that so easily entangles, as it says in Hebrews 12, we need to entrust ourselves to God to help us repent of it by fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. He promises to help us in our time of need.

“...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...” ... Hebrews 12:1-2

All we need to do is confess it before Him, as it says in 1 John 1:9, and He promises to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and will purify us from all unrighteousness.” ... 1 John 1:9

All of it. Not just some of our sins – all of them!

That’s our part – confession of our sin. Admitting our idolatry is real. And trusting God for His forgiveness.

But how can God forgive such evil without compromising His own Holy Justice?

That’s the glorious beauty of the Gospel, isn’t it!

God is both just and justifier of the ungodly.

God is just. He cannot just willy-nilly forgive sin ... to ignore it. No, it has to be dealt with.

Over and over again, God calls out His people for their idolatry – using strong language to do so, as we heard a few minutes ago.

But over and over again, God holds back His justice, His wrath.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”, Dt 6:4,

And Jesus Christ DID hear.

In His humanity, He DID love the LORD our God with ALL of His heart, with ALL of His soul, with ALL of His mind, and with ALL of His strength. With every fiber of His being.

For you.

For me.

Throughout His entire earthly life, He obeyed God perfectly. In His humanity, He was sinless.

The message of Deuteronomy is that the blessing is promised to the obedient. And in His sinless humanity, Jesus Christ earned that blessing.

And that blessing becomes ours only when we put our personal faith, our trust, in Jesus Christ. He gives it to us freely. Just for the asking.

But not without great personal cost. Because the curse we so rightly deserve needs to be removed if we’re to receive the blessing.

That’s the other message of Deuteronomy: God’s curse given for disobedience, for sin.

So, for our sake and for our salvation, Jesus Christ took on Himself our sin, our disobedience.

Yes, God held back His judgment and wrath out of gracious compassion for His rebellious creatures, but He let it loose – full strength! – on His own Son on the cross, didn't he? This was no cheap grace; it was very costly grace. Costly to Him!

“God presented him [Jesus Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”

... Rom 3:25-26

Almighty God poured out His wrath on His own Son – He gave Him the curse that we so rightly deserve – so that He could forgive us and give us His blessing!

God treated His own Son as if He had committed every sin I – you – have ever committed in order to treat us as if we had perfectly obeyed the Law of God. His righteousness is mine!

Oh, what manner of love is this!

And to think there are those who believe that Almighty God hasn't done enough! That there should be more than one way to get us past the bar of God's Justice.

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Nobody can come to the Father, but by Him. (John 14:6)

Have you truly put your personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ? If not, then in the Name of Jesus Christ, do it now.

Praise God!

Finally, let us remember that we have been called to be a light TO the world, and not a reflection OF it.

As believers in Christ, as citizens of His Kingdom, we are His ambassadors, called to let our light shine. The church is to be strong and courageous, and to be a light TO the world ... in the world, but not OF the world.

We are not ever to be reflection OF the world.

Let Christ shine!

And the only way we can ever do that is to grow in our faith, to love the LORD our God with everything in us, to grow in that love, and to heed the warning of John:

“Dear children, keep yourself from idols.” ... 1 John 5:21

Hear the Call to Worship once again:

I am the Lord,
I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the Lord,
that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
—Isaiah 42:6-8, NRSV

To God be all the Glory!

Amen.

Let us pray...