

To “Know Him who is True”

Introduction

Last week, we came to the “part in the middle” – the golden calf. After the service, I received the following email – an email that I really appreciated, and that has been the impetus for today’s message.

“Timothy, Thank you for the message this morning. The topic is one that seems to keep popping up lately. We discussed it during lunch. Sometimes the idols that get set up are pretty obvious and our worship of God is at the very least self serving and certainly not God honoring. However it seems as though there are more subtle "golden calves" that cause us to not worship in a God honoring way. Would you care to expound on that a little more with other examples? Thanks.”

First of all, it was mentioned that this topic of idolatry is one that “seems to keep popping up lately.” Maybe we’ve *all* noticed this. In fact, it’s really a very major theme in Exodus, as we’ll be reminded of in a minute. So, because we’ve already talked about this issue of idolatry a few times before, I chose to mainly emphasize last week the true depravity of our sinful, fleshly natures, and the importance of never trusting ourselves, but only and always trusting in the Redeemer.

I read an article recently by Dallas Willard that was talking about “spiritual formation.” The premise was that if we will strive to exercise the “freedom” of our “self-determined” wills, then we can come to be people (in this life) of whom this diagnosis is no longer true: “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Through his books and writings, Dallas Willard was hugely popular and influential in Christian circles (and he continues to be so even after his death in 2013), and yet his commentary on our human nature is opposed to the teaching of Scripture – even though he quotes Scripture all the time. Only the Scriptures can reveal to us the true nature of our fallen, sinful condition, and yet we must still be careful not to twist and distort those Scriptures to fit what **we** would naturally **rather** think about ourselves. The message of the Bible is this: Never trust yourself. Never even trust what you want to think **about** yourself and about human nature. Believe only what the Bible has revealed about our fallen, sinful condition, and therefore trust only in God – crying out always to Him for His mercy and grace. **If you approach life, practically, with this mindset, you can’t possibly remain unchanged.**

Now, that was the emphasis I chose for last week; nevertheless, we can’t avoid the reality that this account of the golden calf is *yet another* clear warning of the propensity—the **inclination**, the **bent**—of our human hearts to this **specific** sin of **idolatry** – a theme that keeps “popping up” in Exodus. So, this morning I want to preach just one more message on this very important subject of idolatry.

I. What is the difference between the 1st and 2nd commandments (polytheism and idolatry)?

When we think of idolatry, we usually think of worshipping “other” gods. So, in the days of Israel, we would think of idolatry as being when the people worshiped the false god, Baal, rather

than the true God, Yahweh. In our time and culture, we might think of idolatry as whenever something in our life takes the place of God in our love and affections – so, when we make work a priority over church, or make money a priority over giving and being generous. We think of these things as “idols” in our lives, but it would really be more accurate to think of these things as *other* “gods.” Polytheism is the worship of multiple different *gods*. *Idolatry* is the worship of any god or gods **by means of** an *idol*. So, in Exodus chapter 20 we have the first commandment:

- Exodus 20:3 — You shall have no other gods before me.

This commandment forbids the worship of all other (false) gods, and so, of course, it also forbids any of the idols dedicated to the worship of these false gods. But this commandment *doesn't* explicitly address the question of whether I can have an idol dedicated to the worship of *Yahweh*, the one *true* God. So, this is what explains the need for the second commandment:

- Exodus 20:4–5a — You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in 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 or serve them. [You shall not use idols in your worship of Me.]

So, I think we can all agree that we're not to have any other gods besides the one true God. We could probably even agree on what many of these gods might be in our lives, today: Money, recreation, hobbies, children, family, relationships, clothes and outward appearance, possessions, entertainment, social media, etc. We see the need for the first commandment in our lives today, and we may even see some of the places where we've broken that commandment, but what about the second commandment? How, exactly, are we guilty of idolatry in our professed worship of the God of the Bible? Where are the golden calves that we build and shape and then dedicate to the worship of Yahweh?

II. What is the problem with idolatry?

Moses warns the Israelites in Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 4:15–16 — Watch yourselves very carefully. *Since you saw no form* on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure.

One commentator writes:

“Nothing **created** can serve to represent [Yahweh], not even in the whole range of the created order, from top to bottom, and even in the realms of the [mythic] creatures, in the heavens above and in the waters below the earth, because Yahweh has made every thing and every being. He is beyond them all... No image conceivable to [us] could serve to represent him. [We] must worship him **as he is, not as [we] can envision him or would like him to be.**” (Durham)

That last phrase is key. “[We] must worship [God] as he is, **not as [we] can envision him or would like him to be.**” The physical carved images are really just the result of mental images. The point isn’t that the people of Israel thought of Yahweh as a calf, but they did think that this calf could represent and embody how they *thought* of Yahweh, and so be a faithful representation of His presence with them. So Calvin writes: “The god whom man has thus conceived inwardly he attempts to embody outwardly. The mind, in this way, conceives the [god], and the hand gives it birth [in the carved image].” (Calvin) Even if we aren’t shaping carved images today, we can still be shaping in our minds a false and unworthy mental “image” of God.

Of course, it’s easy to see the idol if it’s a golden calf sitting in your living room with the inscription, “dedicated to the one true God of the Bible,” but it’s trickier to identify the idol that exists only in our minds and hearts – still bearing the “sincere” inscription, dedicated to the one true God of the Bible. So the question is this: For how many of us is the God of Christianity – the God that we profess to worship – either in part, or in whole a god that we ourselves have conceived and given birth to in our own minds? To help us answer this question, we need to ask *why* any of us would do anything so “foolish” in the first place.

III. What makes idolatry so alluring and attractive?

Why would any of us conceive and give birth to an idol in our minds that we then call by the same name as the one true God of the Bible? And the answer is right there in the question: Because a god that *I* have conceived and given birth to is a god that can be molded around me – a god that can in some way be made to “fit” me. Conceiving in our minds an idolatrous version of the God of the Bible allows me to “obey” “God” and “worship” “God” and “believe” in “God” and have all the promises of “God” and the assurance of eternal life through Jesus Christ (all the trappings of genuine Christianity) while, at the same time, still maintaining a certain measure of “control.” So the God of the Bible whom I obey, and worship, and believe is the God who, though I might never be willing to admit it, has been made to fit rather nicely, and even comfortably, around me.

We see this very clearly in the account of Israel and the golden calf. From day one—Moses has been God’s representative to the people, and the people’s representative before God. Now, Moses has been gone for going on a month and a half. The people are feeling abandoned and vulnerable in the middle of the desert. How can they be convinced again of the presence of Yahweh to lead them and to protect them and to go before them? In that culture, the answer was obvious. Make a golden calf to represent Yahweh and dedicate that image to His worship. (cf. Exod. 32:4-5) *Now* Yahweh can be a god for them to “worship” and “obey,” and yet also a god that is present when, and how, and where they want Him to be – a god that fits nicely and comfortably around them.

Can you see the subtlety, here? Indeed, it’s exceedingly subtle. The thing about idolatry is that it’s always done in the *name* of the one true God. And yet for all the subtlety, what’s at stake is *life or death*. To the people of Israel, God says: As soon as you try “worshiping” the one true God by means of an idol, you’re *not actually* worshiping God, and so all you’re left with, in reality, as the object of your worship is a metal image, which, in effect becomes another god – a

false god. (cf. Psalm 106:19-21) We can picture the back and forth: “When you try ‘worshipping’ the one true God by means of an image, you’re not actually worshipping Me.” And the people protest: “Yes, we are!” And God answers, “No, you’re not.” “Yes, we are!” “**No. You’re not.**”

God says to us today: “As soon as you try “worshipping” the God of the Bible by means of an image that you have conceived and given birth to in your mind, you’re *not actually* worshipping Me, and so all you’re left with, in reality, as the object of your worship is a figment of your imagination, which, in effect becomes another god – a false god. And once again, we can imagine the dialogue: “You’re not worshipping Me, but an idol that you’ve conceived and given birth to in your own mind.” And, of course, we protest, “No, we’re not!” And God answers, “Yes, you are.” “No, I’m not!” “**Yes. You are.**” What makes idolatry so dangerous is that it looks to us **like** the worship of the true God, when, in fact, it’s the worship of a false god. (See message on Exodus 31:18-32:8) And so, for all the subtlety, we have to see that this is the difference between eternal life and eternal death – the true God and a false idol.

Why all the detailed instructions for the tabernacle? Why is God so particular about every material and every measurement? Why does God say in Exodus 25:

- Exodus 25:9 (cf. 25:40; 26:30; 27:8) — **Exactly** as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it.

The reason is because to improvise in any way—to change the pattern in any detail—would result in a counterfeit – something invented by the human imagination versus that which is revealed from heaven by God. (See message on Exod. 24:12-25:9) The counterfeit might still be dedicated to the worship of Yahweh, but, in fact, it could only be the worship of a false god – a god that the Israelites had imagined.”

Why the instructions in Exodus chapter 20?

- Exodus 20:24–25 — An altar of **earth** you shall make for me... **If** you make me an altar of **stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it.**

The moment an Israelite begins to carve and fashion an altar for the worship of Yahweh, he can’t help but to be conceiving and giving birth in his mind to an idol – an idol shaped by his own **imagination**. (See message on Exod. 20:22-26) The altar might still be dedicated to the worship of Yahweh, but, in fact, it could only be the worship of a false god. So only an altar of earth, or an altar of unshaped stones will do.

Why is the specific sin of idolatry forbidden in the Ten Commandments, and then, *again*, immediately after the Ten Commandments? (Exod. 20:4-5, 22-23) It’s because God knows how instinctively prone we all are to idol-making – to re-imagining the God of the Bible in some way—any way—that’s more conducive to me – to who I am and how I want to be.

IV. What are the signs and evidences of idolatry in my life?

So here's a crazy question, but a desperately important one: When I speak of "God," **who**, exactly, do I mean? Have you ever asked yourself that before? It's no trivial or academic question. It's a question we all need to be asking ourselves. When I speak of "God," who do I mean?

For some of us, we've grown up with "God-speak" and "God-talk." Maybe we've grown up in Christian homes. Maybe we've always attended a solid Christian church. We know the songs and we sing them on Sunday. We know the Scripture verses and we post them on our social media sites. We've been baptized, and we take the Lord's Supper. But in all of our "God-speak" and "God-talk," have we ever stopped to ask ourselves the question: "*When I speak of God, who do I truly mean?*" After all, "God" isn't just a three-letter word. And so there's always the danger that it's precisely my "idol version" of the God of the Bible that has been allowing me to "obey" "God" and "worship" "God" and "believe" in "God" and have all the promises of "God" and the "assurance" of eternal life through Jesus Christ (all the trappings of genuine Christianity) while, at the same time, still being the one around whom "God" comfortably "fits."

How do I know if this is me? How often does your God require you to do what you feel is "impossible"? Does your God regularly call you to live in a way that you feel every fiber of the sin nature within you struggling against? If not, then I've created an idolatrous version of God that fits around me.

- Galatians 5:17 — The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Does your God regularly provoke in you a genuine conviction of personal sin and unrighteousness and guilt? Does your God stir in you a personal fear and trembling at the judgments of His holy law? If not, then I've created an idolatrous version of God that fits around me.

- Romans 3:19–20 — We know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Does your God send you constantly to the foot of the cross of Christ – to find, there, forgiveness, and restoration, and joy, and peace with Him? (cf. Eph. 1:7; 1 Jn. 1:9) Does your God provide you with the Holy Spirit so that you might *do* the things now that used to be utterly impossible, and so that now your great hope and expectation is the appearing of Jesus Christ? (Rom. 8:12-13, 22-23) If not, then when we speak of God, we must be speaking of an idol that we have conceived and given birth to in our own minds.

- Ephesians 1:7 — In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

- Romans 8:12–13 — So then... we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if [we] live according to the flesh [we] will die, but if by the Spirit [we] **put to death** [violent conflict] the deeds of the body, [we] will live.
- Hebrews 9:27–28 — And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save **those who are eagerly waiting for him**.

When you speak of “God,” who do you mean? It’s a question we should always be asking, because the answer will shape and determine every single moment in the living of our lives. The *practice of right thinking about God* and the true knowledge of God is the foundation, and even the guarantee, of **all** practical Christian living. Or, let me say it this way: The true knowledge of the true God is **the** key to walking in a manner worthy of the Lord, **fully** pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in **every** good work. (cf. Col. 1:10)

I think, perhaps, one of the biggest signs of idolatry among professing Christians today is a lack of “seriousness.” I’m not talking about being straight-lipped and joyless! I’m just talking about the seriousness implied in these words:

- Deuteronomy 6:4–5 — Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with **all your might**.

The point, here, isn’t some emotional high – the point is “seriousness.” A God who isn’t daily calling forth from us this kind of seriousness must not be the true God, but an idol – a mere image of the true God that we’ve conceived and given birth to in our own minds.

V. THE WONDERFUL, POWERFUL ANTIDOTE TO IDOLATRY

Last week, we ended the service with this Scripture, but now I want to read it again, here. These are the closing verses of 1 John, and they’re meant both to encourage us, and to warn us.

- 1 John 5:20–21 — We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

The specific idol that John has been addressing in his letter is the prevalent false teaching about a Jesus who was in some way “less” than God. For John, a God who has not revealed Himself *fully* and *completely* in the person of Jesus Christ is altogether an idol – a god not real, but rather the product of men’s imaginations. (cf. 1 Jn. 2:22-23; Akin, NAC) But John doesn’t just warn against *this* idol. He warns us all, in general: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” Guard yourselves from any version of God conceived and given birth to in your own mind, and make it your business throughout all of life to know Him who is true – if, in fact, you are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ.

In all of our “God-speak” and “God-talk,” have we ever stopped to ask ourselves the question: “When I speak of God, who do *I truly* mean?” Because, *it matters*. It can even be the difference between eternal life and eternal death. In all of our “God-activity” and “God-worship,” have we

ever stopped to ask ourselves the question: “Is it really the God of the Bible that I’m worshipping, or is it an idol that I’ve set up in His place – a mere image of the true God *fitting* nicely, and even comfortably around me?”

The Apostle Paul speaks of those who have the appearance of godliness, but who have denied it’s power. (2 Tim. 3:5) Family background is not enough; church attendance is not enough; serving in the church is not enough; singing loudly is not enough; Bible knowledge is not enough; quoting Scripture verses is not enough; listening to sound Christian teachers is not enough, being baptized and taking the Lord’s Supper is not enough—not if all these things have somehow become our idol, our substitute for God Himself.

There may be someone here today who’s realizing that all his life he’s never really known the true God in and through His Son Jesus Christ. Will you repent, today, of all your “God-speak” and “God-talk” and “God-activity” and “God-worship”? Will you cast down all your idols and come in saving faith to the God who came all the way down to us in Christ, and who now calls us to deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow Him? (cf. Mat. 16:24)

Why did God give us the commandment against making graven images? Because He knows the inclination and the bent of our hearts. Why does God warn us through the Apostle John against idols? Because He knows how very quickly we can all fall into idol making. Calvin was right to say: “The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols... The human mind, stuffed as it is with presumptuous rashness, dares to imagine a god suited to its own capacity... it substitutes vanity and an empty phantom in the place of God.”

So how do we make it our serious business throughout all of life to know Him who is true? There is only one place where we can learn of the one true God, and that’s in the Scriptures. We need to come regularly to the Scriptures—all of them—that *they* might cast down and destroy all our idols. We need to not only seek out faithful teachers, but also diligently apply ourselves to instruction and exhortation from the word. We need to earnestly ask *God* to teach us, and guard us, and shut down our idol factories. Perhaps to sum it all up, we need to be earnestly seeking in all of the Scriptures to behold Jesus, in whom “all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19), and “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” (Col. 2:3)