

Flee Idolatry! I Corinthians 10:14

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. - I Cor. 10:14, ESV

Idols? Seriously?

So, are we really going to have a whole sermon on idols? What year is this anyway? Of all the things we might read about in the Bible that might seem relevant to our lives, surely the stories of the Golden Calves and of Baal worship seem pretty far removed from our day and time. We actually are seeing a revival in old-fashioned pagan idolatry in our culture in recent years, from bumper stickers that say “Goddess Bless” or “Love Your Mother” (meaning Mother Earth) to the growth in Wicca, so that In 2011, the United States Air Force Academy dedicated an \$80,000 "outdoor worship center" for "Earth-based religions" such as Paganism and traditional Native American religions. Druids are gathering at Stonehenge for worship again. But still . . . those things are all pretty distant from our everyday lives, right? The closest most of us get to idolatry might be the Buddha statues in Chinese restaurants. Or, is it?

John Calvin famously said, “Man's nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.” Martin Luther said, “Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God, your functional savior.” And to build on what we discussed last week, the great Puritan pastor Thomas Watson said, “Thus men make many gods. The apostle names the wicked man’s trinity, *“The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life,”* (I Jn. 2:16). The lust of the flesh is pleasure; the lust of the eye, money; the pride of life, honor. O take heed of this!”

So, once we understand the true nature of idolatry, we will see that it is something which affects all of us very deeply, and then, if we will hear the plea of the Apostle Paul here in I Corinthians 10:14, we will want to everything we can to be rid of our idols, to flee far from them.

I. Therefore . . .

Paul opens this verse with “*Therefore*,” which connects this verse with all that has come before. Everything Paul said in verses 1-12 of 1 Corinthians 10 was summarized by verse 13, which we looked at last week, saying essentially that the same kinds of temptations they faced are what we are still facing today – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – and that God is faithful to provide a way of escape. THEREFORE, my beloved, flee idolatry.

Paul could have said, “THEREFORE, flee from all of these temptations,” but he was more specific and narrow: Flee idolatry. Every kind of temptation that comes upon us, that is common to humanity, and yet one specific application: Flee Idolatry.

Last week, I said that the issue of idolatry for the Corinthians was primarily an issue of pride: They thought they knew better, were more enlightened, could see right through the man-made idols, and didn’t need to worry about being tempted or led astray. They thought they were above that. After all, they were the truly spiritual and wise ones.

Yet idolatry also carried with it the very real flesh temptations to gluttony and sexual immorality, because the idol feasts in the Temple were sumptuous spreads of meat and rich foods, and gluttony was encouraged. And, of course, the presence of Temple prostitutes offered fleshly indulgences of another kind.

But finally, attending pagan Temple feasts were important for professional advancement, as trade guilds and craftsman guilds met for their business lunches in the Temple courts. So, the Temples and their idols could also be a pull for lust of the eyes, for materialism.

The prevalence and central importance of the many idol temples made this a constant, pressing temptation for the Corinthians, which appealed to all of the major categories of sin and temptation.

II. My Beloved

Notice, also, how Paul addresses the Corinthians with very warm and loving language. He addresses them as “my beloved.” The word he uses here is *agapetoi* which means the ones I love with agape love, with a free and gracious and Christ-like love. In other words, it’s not just “my friends” or “Hey, pals.” It’s much deeper love.

If we’re ever going to be used by God to confront anyone in their sin and call them to repentance, they will need to know how much we love them first. I remember when I first got involved in youth ministry many years ago, I was told, “They will not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Especially when we have to deliver some tough love, honest and straight talk, we need to make sure we show how much we love and how our words of correction are truly spoken in love.

But Paul does love the Corinthians, and it is because he loves them that he is urging them to free from idolatry. He knows what a deadly trap idolatry has always proven to be for God’s people, and so he pleads with them to flee from it. The verb Paul uses is *pheugete* – fugete – the word we get fugitive from. A true fugitive is one who is on the run for their lives, desperate to escape. That’s the attitude we need to have toward our idols.

III. Flee from Idolatry

Now that we’ve gotten some clarification on the original context of this short verse, we need to see how it connects and applies to our lives. What is idolatry? What would it look like in our lives? Why are we drawn toward idolatry? And then, how do we flee idolatry?

A. What is idolatry?

First of all, what exactly is idolatry? People use the term in a very fuzzy way, and if we’re not talking about going to the literal Temple of Aphrodite, what do we mean?

Well, in the Bible, idolatry takes two main forms, which are covered by the first and second commandments:

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

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“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, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

– Exodus 20:1-6, ESV

When the first commandment says, “You shall have no other gods before me,” it doesn’t mean that we can worship other gods as long as God has first place. It means we cannot have any other gods before God’s presence. This is the first and most obvious form of idolatry, when we worship other gods. We do this when we place our trust, our hope, and our expectation for the future in anything less than God Himself.

Sometimes the worst idolatry is self-worship, trusting in ourselves, in our intellect, our ability, our plans for the future, our earning potential, or whatever. It’s not wrong to make plans or to seek to develop the gifts and abilities God has given us, but we need to make sure we don’t confuse the gift with the giver and trust and worship the creation, including ourselves.

French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal said, “There is nothing so abominable in the eyes of God and of men as idolatry, whereby men render to the creature that honor which is due only to the Creator.” Our trust, our faith, our hope, and our deepest devotion belong to God and to God alone, and we are foolish idolaters anytime we trust in anything less. Dwight L. Moody said, “You don’t have to go to heathen lands today to find false gods. America is full of them. Whatever you love more than God is your idol.”

In our cultural context, two of the most common idols are politics and the American dream. If you think the statement, “The only hope for America now is . . .” can be

completed by anything but Jesus, then you have probably fallen into the trap of the idol of politics. If you're a parent and you think, "When my children grow up, I really hope . . ." and you finish that thought with anything but "they love and follow Jesus," then you have probably fallen into the trap of the idol of the American dream.

But, of course, in our culture, other idols abound: sports teams, celebrities, popularity, etc. How do you know if your heart is being given over to an idol? Well, idols all make promises and demand costs. Stop and think about it: The idol promises that it, and it alone, can give you what your heart most desires, and then demands a cost, a price for getting what it promises to give.

The biggest sign of idol-entrapment is if your idol causes you to sin or neglect God's priorities for your life in the pursuit of the idol and its promises. God calls us to love Him with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Whatever pulls us away from loving God as we know we should or loving our neighbors is probably an idol that has our hearts. The classic examples are Christians who are fans of one sports team being aggressive and angry toward fans of a competing team (not in a good-natured joking way, but in a mean-spirited way) or Christians mocking and attacking those who disagree with them politically. Or deliberately choosing to repeatedly miss gathered worship for the sake of your sports team or something else.

Rebecca Pippert, in her excellent book, *Out of the Saltshaker*, gives us an excellent way to uncover our idols: "Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by acceptance. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives."

We need to remember that idols never keep their promises, and they keep demanding larger and larger sacrifices, greater and greater costs. But, in the end, our idols don't love us; they are really just the traps Satan uses to ensnare and enslave us, stealing our joy in the Lord and rendering us impotent for God's service in this world.

The second major form of idolatry, as reflected in the second commandment, is when we do not worship God as He deserves. The specific prohibition is against

making carved or graven images for use in worship. This happened very famously twice in Israel's history with the Golden Calves. In Exodus 32, Aaron made a Golden Calf out of the plundered earrings the Israelites had taken from the Egyptians. And then, in I Kings 12:25, King Jeroboam, the first king of Northern Israel, made Golden Calves for the Northern Ten Tribes of Israel. These Golden Calves were not other gods; they were intended to be representations of YaHWeH, but anytime we make an image of God, we reduce His greatness and glory and make a very poor imitation of Him, robbing Him of the honor due Him.

How do we do this today? A.W. Tozer said, "The essence of idolatry is the entertainment of thoughts about God that are unworthy of Him." When people say, "Well, the God I worship would never send anyone to hell" or "I could never believe in a God who was so narrow-minded, so intolerant," they are engaging in idolatry. The essence of this idolatry is really trying to re-create God either in our own image or in a reduced and more tame form that we can comprehend and try to control.

The most obvious form of this that is thriving in the Christian world today is the Prosperity Gospel version of God, who functions essentially as a giant cosmic ATM, and the strength of our faith determines whether we have the right PIN number to unlock His treasures. There have been softer versions of this, like the Prayer of Jabez from years ago, and more mainstream versions, like Joel Osteen, and it is the version of God promoted by President Trump's spiritual advisor, Paula White. This is not the God of the Bible, but an idol, created by the imagination of men and women.

It is interesting that it is in the context of the second commandment, and not the first, that God says, "*for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.*" Rightly understanding the jealousy of God helps us see the heart of God and also the reason why this sin is so serious. Many people stumble at the idea of a jealous God, because they can only think in terms of sinful human jealousy, which is the ugly green-eyed monster. But God's jealousy is a holy, pure jealousy, and it reveals the essential difference between the One true God and all idols.

All idols promise stuff to us and want stuff from us. The relationship with an idol is transactional. False views of God make God look more like an idol, someone who will give us what our hearts desire if only we will trust Him enough, serve Him enough, give Him enough, etc. But here's the thing we miss about the one true God,

and it's seen in His holy jealousy, God doesn't want stuff from us; He wants us. He wants our hearts. And God doesn't want to give us stuff that we want; He wants to give us Himself. That's why the central covenant promise is "I will be your God, and you will be my people" and the central covenant picture we're given is of God taking His people to Himself as His bride.

God doesn't want us trying to make Him look like an idol. He's jealous for us, and He doesn't want our relationship reduced to a transactional one, when it is essentially a deep and transformative relationship. He redeems us to Himself. He makes us His and gives Himself to us to be ours forever.

B. Why idolatry?

So, why do we ever turn aside from this wonderful God to chase after idols? Two main reasons:

1. Because we want stuff – lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes – more than God.
2. Because we want to be God; that is, we want to be in control – pride of life.

Think back to the Garden of Eden, the temptation we examined last week: The forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was good for food and a delight to the eyes; it was the kind of thing Adam and Even wanted to have for themselves. But the clincher was that it held the promise of making Adam and Eve to be like God, to take God's place and would allow them to be the arbiter of good and evil in their lives, instead of trusting and depending on God.

We want to be in control, which means we don't really trust that God's ways are higher and better than our ways. Sure, we pay lip-service to the idea, but we really like our own ideas and plans best, and if we can manipulate God by "faith" into endorsing and blessing our plans, then great, But if we can't, well then, we'll just go seek someone else or something else who will give us what we want, who will make all our dreams come true.

I wonder how many of us are old enough to remember where these lyrics come from:

Give us any chance we'll take it
 Read us any rule we'll break it
 We're going to make our dreams come true
 Doing it our way

Nothing's going to hold us back now
 Straight ahead and on the track now
 We're going to make our dreams come true

There ain't nothing we won't try
 Never heard the word impossible
 This time there's no stopping us
 We're going to do it

On your marks, get set, and go now
 Got a dream and we must know now
 We're going to make our dreams come true

And we'll do it our way, yes our way
 Make all our dreams come true
 When we do it our way, yes our way
 Make all our dreams
 Come true
 For me and you

That's the anthem of the American Dream, and that's the anthem of idolatry.

C. Flee? How?

Paul tells us very clearly and very urgently to flee idolatry. Flee this self-centered approach to life and to God. But how can we?

The Apostle John wrote, in John 5:20-21:

And 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. -ESV

To flee idolatry and keep ourselves from idols, we need to remember, reflect, repent, and reject:

- I. **Remember:** We need to remember the one true God and remember that He alone is true and that He alone has eternal life because He alone is eternal

life. One great way to do this every week is to remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy, to set aside the first day of the week for worship, for remembering, for rejoicing in the one true God. Another way is to begin each day in the Word, remembering who God is and what He has done.

2. **Reflect:** We need to reflect on a key question: What promises are we believing? We live our lives each day on the basis of expectant hope. We believe that if we do certain things, we will get certain results, and that's based on an implicit belief in promises. If I trust the promises, I will do certain things, expecting certain results. It might mean that I put in extra hours at the office, expecting to get a promotion or a big raise or bonus. It might mean that I spend hours on social media, expecting to get the approval and acceptance my soul craves.

So, are we believing the promises of the world or are we believing the promises of the Lord? God says to us that we should trust in Him with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding, but in all of our ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct our paths. (Proverbs 3:5-6). He tells us He will never leave us nor forsake us, but He will be our Good Shepherd through life and in death, and we can trust Him.

We need to reflect: Which promises are we believing?

3. **Repent:** Where we find ourselves trusting the promises of the world or of our flesh, instead of the promises of God, we need to repent, turn back to the Lord, and trust His promises again.
4. **Reject:** Keeping ourselves from idols at times feels a bit like Whack-a-Mole. We need to quickly and firmly reject the false promises and siren song of idols. This might mean cutting off social media or cable news or other inputs that regularly cause us to stumble. Jesus said, *"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."* – Matthew 5:29-30, ESV.

The Only Solution

In the end, though, our relentless tendency toward idolatry has only one solution: the life-giving, life-changing worship of the one true, triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is where living the Gospel and not just paying lip-service to the Gospel makes all the difference.

God created us in His image, because He made us for Himself. Sin mars the image of God in us and alienates us from God, from one another, and from ourselves. At the heart of the alienation brought to our lives by sin is idolatry: replacing God, who is distant from us because of our sin, with substitute Saviors, false gods uttering false promises or false imitations of the one true God designed to be under our control.

Only through the cross of Jesus Christ are we reconciled to God. He shed His blood on the cross to atone for our sin and reconcile us to God. He paid the redemption price to buy us back from condemnation, alienation and idolatry. He rose again to give us eternal life. He did this to bring us back to God, and to repair the relationship sin had broken.

But we are redeemed by Christ to a loving, vital relationship with God, a relationship we nurture and strengthen through worship. By worship, I mean glorifying and enjoying God for who He is and for all He has done for us, delighting our souls in God for God's sake, and not for what we might get from Him. For what we most need from Him is what He most freely offers – Himself – and we receive and delight in Him in worship.

Learning to meditate on the character of God, delight in the goodness of God, sing the praises of God, rest and abide in the presence of God in prayer and devotion. This is what we were created for, and this is ultimately the only solution to idolatry – to be so satisfied and delighted in God that any false substitute is immediately rejected as cheap and hollow.