

Shorter Catechism 45-48
Ezekiel 8
Psalm 63
1 Cor 10

“The Lure and Cure of Idolatry”

March 12, 2017

*Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark,
each in his room of pictures?*

This gets at the heart of idolatry.

What do you do in the dark?

What do you do when no one is watching?

We go to church and worship the Triune God on Sunday –
and we try to maintain an image of being a good, upstanding Christian,
when others are around.

But what rules your heart?

Who rules your “room of pictures” –
that private realm of your heart/mind.

Joel showed us last week that the preface to the 10 commandments
makes it abundantly clear that the law of God comes to us in the context of grace.

And as we go through the 10 Commandments,
we always need to remember that *grace* comes before law.

Our obedience to God is rooted in our gratitude for the great redemption
that he has wrought in Jesus Christ.

We see this in the pattern of worship on Sunday morning.

We begin our service with a confession of sin and declaration of pardon.

Every week we are reminded that the foundation of the Christian life
is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The movement of our worship service moves from guilt to grace to gratitude.
from confession of sin to God’s declaration of pardon
and from hearing the gospel of Christ to the response of thankfulness,
concluding with the Lord’s Supper.

The Ten Commandments, then, give God’s directions for a life of gratitude.

Children, I have a question for you.

What is an idol?

We’ve popularized the term today to refer to a popular person.

So we have a TV show called “American Idol”
where you are supposed to vote for your favorite singer.
Sports heroes can be “idols.”
Some children grow up dreaming that they might someday be like
Michael Jordan, LeBron James, or Tom Brady.
And there is a sense in which these are indeed “idols.”
An idol is an image that is worshiped.
Or more precisely, you worship your god by means of the image.
I doubt that too many youngsters ‘worshiped’ Michael Jordan.
But they worshiped *through* Michael Jordan.
When we say “I want to be like so-and-so”
we are idolizing them.
We are turning them into an idealized image –
the image that we want to be conformed to.

Claiming to be wise, we become fools,
and exchange the glory of the immortal God for images
resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1)

Whenever you value the creature more than the Creator,
whenever you are more concerned with what man thinks of you,
than with what God thinks of you,
then you are breaking the first commandment.

Q45: Which is the First Commandment?

A45: The First Commandment is, You shall have no other gods before Me.

This should perhaps be obvious to all of us.

Not only is God our Creator, but he also sent his only Son to die for us,
so that we might live with him forever.

If God has been so kind and gracious as to deliver us from our sin and misery,
it is only fair that we should acknowledge him as our God!

Our catechism nicely summarizes both what is required in the first commandment,
and what is forbidden in the first commandment.

Q46: What is required in the First Commandment?

A46: The First Commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true
God, and our God; and to worship and glorify Him accordingly.

Q47: What is forbidden in the First Commandment?

A47: The First Commandment forbids the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true
God, as God, and the giving of that worship and glory to any other which is due to Him alone.

For each commandment the catechism will ask “what is required?” and “what is forbidden?”

Because when God says “you shall have no other gods before me,”

He is not only forbidding the worship of other gods,
but he is also commanding us positively to worship him.

To put it another way,

God is saying that he must be first in our life.

Nothing else can take his place.

In order to highlight this, question 48 asks:

Q48: What are we specially taught by these words, *before me* in the First Commandment?

A48: These words *before me* in the First Commandment, teach us, That God who sees all things, takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God.

I’ve titled this sermon, “The Lure and Cure of Idolatry,”

because I want us to see why God puts this commandment up front.

All other sins are ultimately rooted in this one.

If we *always* loved God with all our heart –
if we *never* put anything ahead of him,
then we would never sin!

So:

1. What Is Required in Having “No Other Gods”? (Psalm 63)

Our Catechism states that

A46: The First Commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship and glorify Him accordingly.

This is at the heart of Psalm 63,
the Psalm that we sang earlier.

a. Knowing God to Be *Our God*

Psalm 63 opens with a statement that God is *my God*.

Psalm 63 is a song of David – “when he was in the wilderness of Judah” –
a dry weary land where there is no water.

I’m parched and thirsty.

Life without God is like life in the desert.

And so Psalm 63 starts with an acknowledgement that God is *my God*.

You can find a lot of people who will acknowledge God.

O yes! I believe in God!

I believe in Jesus – and all that!

But do you know and acknowledge God to be *your God*?

Because if he *is* your God,
then you need to do what he says.
If you say that you believe in God,
but you ignore what he says,
then he is not *your* God.

You may believe in him,
but he's not your *God* –
he's simply a deity out there that you acknowledge.

How does Psalm 63 say this?
And there are three things that my soul does in Psalm 63:
My soul thirsts for you (v1)
My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food (v5)
My soul clings to you (v8)

Do you speak to God this way?
Does your soul thirst for God?
Does your body faint for God?

I know that for myself, I can very easily forget God – even while I'm preaching about him!
How does David do it?
Notice verse 2:
“So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.”

What does that mean?
That means that David went to the tabernacle.
He was feeling dry and parched –
he didn't *feel* like worshiping God.
But he did it anyway!
How often do you wake up Sunday morning and say, “I feel like worshiping God”?

Notice also verse 6:
“when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night.”
It's not that David *felt like it* – and then did it.
No, David *did it* – and then he felt like it.

Why is it that our hearts wander and stray?
Because we are not disciplined.
We have no self-control.
We are creatures of habit – and we have trained our habits to pursue other gods –
to seek first other kingdoms.

If we would learn to seek first the kingdom of Christ,
then we must learn the habit of remembering and meditating on the glory of Christ!

That's why our catechism says "and worship and glorify him accordingly."

b. Worshiping God and Glorifying Him

If we know and acknowledge God to be the true God and our God,
then we *should* worship and glorify him!

We should love the LORD our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength.

When you put the first commandment positively,
it sounds easy!

Sure, I know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and my God,
and so I worship and glorify him accordingly.

Okay, we're good!
Right?

But that's why the catechism puts it both ways!
After all, the 1st commandment itself states,
"you shall have no other gods before me."

2. What Is Forbidden in Having "No Other Gods"? (Ezekiel 8)

Q47: What is forbidden in the First Commandment?

A47: The First Commandment forbids the denying, or not worshipping and glorifying the true God, as God, and the giving of that worship and glory to any other which is due to Him alone.

Here's where we really get to the lure of idolatry.

And it goes two ways.

First, there is the idolatry of omission –
where we simply "neglect" the worship of God.

But second, there is the idolatry of commission –
where we actually worship other gods.

Sins of commission are those sins where we actively do something wrong.

So, if you sleep with your neighbor's wife, you have *committed* adultery.

But sins of omission are equally sinful.

Maybe you've always been outwardly faithful to your wife,
but you've just used her for your own sexual fulfillment.

You have *omitted* the love and the honor that you owe her!

If God is God – and if he is *your* God –
then what do you owe him?

a. The Idolatry of Omission: Neglecting to Worship the True God

The idolatry of omission is stated bluntly in Hebrews 10:25,
“do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some,
but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
The context of Hebrews 10 is *worship* –
entering the holy places by the blood of Jesus –
coming into the presence of God through the sacrifice of his Son.

If we neglect to worship God –
whether the meeting together of God’s people every week,
or our daily gathering in our families, or individually –
then we are loving something else more than we love God.

You cannot love God, but neglect his worship.
And that is true not only for our public worship on Sunday –
but also for our daily worship in our homes and by ourselves.

If you say you love your wife, but you only talk to her when *you* want something,
that’s not love.

Likewise, if we love God, then we need to *seek* him.
So neglecting God – forgetting him – is a serious problem!

b. The Idolatry of Commission: Giving Glory to Any Other

But whenever we forget the Lord – whenever we neglect God –
we can be certain that we are turning to *other gods*.

After all, the first commandment says,
“You shall have no other gods before me.”
The focus of the commandment is on this point.
Don’t put anything else ahead of God.

Ezekiel 8 provides a very striking discussion of idolatry.
Ezekiel was a prophet who lived at the time of the exile (ca. 586 B.C.).
He himself went into exile in Babylon twenty years before.
Earlier in his prophecy,
he has already spoken of the coming destruction of Jerusalem.
Jerusalem will go into exile because of the idolatry of the people.

Ezekiel 8-11 is all part of a single vision.

And at the end of this vision, the glory of the LORD will depart from the temple.

And in this vision, especially in chapter 8, the key theme is the theme of “seeing.”

The verb “to see” is used 13 times in the 18 verses of chapter 8.

And notice where the vision starts:

the first thing that Ezekiel sees is the “the form that had the appearance of a man” –
the vision of the glory of the LORD that had appeared to him before.

When Ezekiel sees the glory of the LORD –

only then does he properly see what is going on all around him.

Remember this –

because you will only make sense of your world –
you will only see the idolatry around you (and in you) –
when you see clearly our Lord Jesus Christ!

Verses 5-18 describe the four abominations for which God abandons the temple:

Ezekiel starts the vision from the northern gate outside the temple,
and moves step by step towards the Holy of Holies –
and as he goes, the idolatry gets worse and worse.

First, The Image of Jealousy (8:5-6)

The ‘Image of Jealousy’ – 8:3-5 – can also be translated “image of Lust” –

most identify it as the goddess Asherah

2 Kings 21:7 says that Manasseh set up an Asherah in the temple,
but king Josiah had torn it down when he cleansed the temple.

Ezekiel’s vision could be a vision of Manasseh’s Asherah –

after all, the book of Kings says that Manasseh’s idolatry
was the reason why God brought judgment on Jerusalem.

But this is what is driving Yahweh “far from his sanctuary.”

Archeologists have found inscriptions and pictures from ancient Israel,
with depictions of “Yahweh and his Asherah” –
showing pictures of Yahweh and Asherah together.

Why would Yahweh-worshippers start worshiping Asherah?

Asherah was the Canaanite fertility goddess.

Her worship included a variety of sexual practices forbidden by Yahweh.
(Hence the term “image of jealousy” which can also mean “image of lust”)

In other words, ancient people were also obsessed with sex –
and so they created “religious” ceremonies to have sex parties.

But that’s not the worst thing Ezekiel sees.

But you will see still greater abominations.

Second, The Room of Pictures (8:7-13)

7 And he brought me to the entrance of the court, and when I looked, behold, there was a hole in the wall. 8 Then he said to me, "Son of man, dig in the wall." So I dug in the wall, and behold, there was an entrance. 9 And he said to me, "Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here." 10 So I went in and saw. And there, engraved on the wall all around, was every form of creeping things and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. 11 And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up.

You need to realize how shocking this is.

These are unclean animals – “creeping things and loathsome beasts” (v10).
It would be bad enough to hear that elders are *eating* them –
but far worse, they are *worshiping* them.

Now, the usage of gods in animal shape strongly suggests Egyptian worship,
where the gods took the shape of crocodiles, snakes, and dung beetles,
among other animals.

(Indeed, the dung beetle especially connects well the word for idol in v10 –
gillulim – or “dung god”)

But it gets worse.

Because there are 70 elders here.

In Moses’s day, there were 70 elders who led the people in following the LORD,
as Israel departed from Egypt.

Now, there are 70 elders who are leading the people back to Egypt.

But the LORD says:

12 Then he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, each in his room of pictures? For they say, 'The Lord does not see us, the Lord has forsaken the land.'"

Remember who these men are.

These are the elders of the house of Israel.

These are the leaders of the Old Testament people of God – the church.

Ezekiel is not in Jerusalem.

Ezekiel is in Babylon, speaking to the *exiled* elders
regarding what is happening “back home.”

The elders of Judah (in exile) are sitting around Ezekiel –
and he tells them about his vision.
But just a few years before, *they* had been the ones leading Jerusalem.
And they had been no different from Jaazaniah and the 70 elders.

And so Ezekiel’s warning comes to them as well.
Are they secretly hoping that Egypt would come and rescue Jerusalem?
Are they putting their hope and trust in the gods of the nations,
rather than in the LORD their God?

What is your secret hope?
Outwardly you act as though the Triune God is your hope and your shield –
but in the dark – in your room of pictures –
what false hope do you cling to?

For one woman it was her “white knight,” whom she hoped would come rescue her.
She would dream of him –
and she would wish that her hum-drum husband
would be more like the man of her dreams.
And she thought of it as her way of coping with a dull, ordinary life.
It was just a harmless fantasy – right?
It destroyed her marriage and sent her down a thousand dead-end roads,
before she realized that she was, in fact, worshiping another god.
It is so easy to ‘baptize’ our selfish desires and say that they are godly.
Here’s the test:
do you *live* as though you believe that “to live is Christ; to die is gain”?
Does your heart overflow with love and gratitude to God?

Or do you linger in the dark – in your room of pictures –
in your secret hopes and dreams and fantasies?

But it gets worse...

Third, The Women Weeping for Tammuz (8:14-15)

14 Then he brought me to the entrance of the north gate of the house of the Lord, and behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz.

We keep getting closer to the Holy Place.
Now we are at the entrance to the north gate of the house of the LORD itself.
And there sat women weeping for Tammuz
the Mesopotamian god of vegetation.

So while the Egyptian gods are worshiped secretly in the side chambers of the temple,

the Babylonian gods are worshiped openly at the very gate of the temple.

15 Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? You will see still greater abominations than these."

Fourth, The Men Worshiping the Sun (8:16-18)

16 And he brought me into the inner court of the house of the Lord. And behold, at the entrance of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about twenty-five men, with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east.

The temple itself was oriented toward the east,
so the rays of the rising sun would have come through the entrance into the holy place.
So in order to worship the sun, you must turn your back to the temple of the LORD.
Shamash was the Assyrian sun god,
and sun-worship was a common practice in all the nations around Israel.

To sum up, we have seen Canaanite, Egyptian, Babylonian, and Assyrian practices –
all in the temple precincts.

The glory of the LORD still resides in the temple,
but it is surrounded by the abominations, the detestable things of the nations.

And the result is found in verse 17:
they have filled the land "with violence."

17 Then he said to me, "Have you seen this, O son of man? Is it too light a thing for the house of Judah to commit the abominations that they commit here, that they should fill the land with violence and provoke me still further to anger? Behold, they put the branch to their nose.

Idolatry is the root of all other sins.

After all, if you are loving and worshiping the Lord your God,
then when you sin, you will repent!
There may be occasional outbreaks of sin and rebellion,
but the general pattern will be righteousness and justice,
because love of neighbor proceeds from the love of God.

Idolatry results in every other sin.

Whenever you see a pattern of sin in your life,
you may be sure that there is a root of idolatry behind it.
You are loving and pursuing something else rather than the living and true God.

3. “Before Me”: Idolatry Is a Really Bad Idea (1 Corinthians 10)

Q48: What are we specially taught by these words, *before me* in the First Commandment?

A48: These words *before me* in the First Commandment, teach us, That God who sees all things, takes notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God.

You see God’s displeasure in Ezekiel 8:18 –

18 Therefore I will act in wrath. My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity. And though they cry in my ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them.”

And then in chapter 9, Ezekiel sees a vision of the destruction of the idolaters –
and he cries out,

“Ah Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel?” (9:8)

And the remnant is marked with the mark of the LORD.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has marked you with his mark.

He has placed his name upon you.

You have been baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, you belong to him.

And so you must flee from idolatry.

When you are at work this week,

I want you to look around –

and I want you to *see* the idolatry (each in his room of pictures).

When you talk with your colleagues – your neighbors – your friends –

I want you to dig through the wall and see what is going on,
(each in his room of pictures).

Because you dwell in the midst of the rebellious house of Israel.

What are the pictures that motivate them?

What are the gods that they worship.

It can be easier – at times –

to see this in others than in yourself.

But as you see the idolatry around you,

remember also Ezekiel’s plea:

“Ah, Lord GOD! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel
in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?” (9:8)

If you have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,

then you cannot be haughty in your attitude

toward those who are committing these abominations!

If you have seen the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,
then you must “sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed,”
and your heart must break as you look at those who are casting themselves
before gods that do not hear, or see, or speak.

And as you come to understand their idolatry –
as you come to see their abominations –
you may also begin to see how you may speak to them.

But before you can speak to them effectively,
you must first “sigh and groan” –
because your heart is broken by the same things that break the heart of God.

But if you would learn to speak,
then you must first learn to see:
and see first the vision of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!

So what is the cure? What is the solution to idolatry?

The solution to idolatry is to flee to Christ.

Paul uses the example of the wilderness wanderings,
and says,
(read 1 Corinthians 10:6-22)