

maranatha

The Curse of Idolatry

Idolatry is the adoration or worship of anything or anyone apart from God, who is the Lord of all.

In the past many worshipped false gods. Some worshipped carved images. Some worshipped the sun, moon and stars. Some worshipped the spirits of mountains, rivers or trees. Pagans, New Agers and occultists still bow down before the impersonal forces of nature rather than before the living God, who is the source of all life. **They worship creation, rather than the creator.**

Today, in our materialistic and commercialised society, living idols are deliberately raised up for allegiance, adulation and even worship. These include heavily promoted celebrities, popular musicians, TV & film entertainers and a range of sports people. They receive mass homage.

In some countries, political tyrants are still worshipped as god-like figures with superhuman characteristics.

Great care was taken in carving craven images centuries ago. Similarly, today the greatest care is taken by advertisers and public relations organisations to create the desired images.

In the past superstitious people were presented with quasi-religious images in prominent places which could be seen by all. Similarly, today with the help of the powerful and wealthy media, personalities are carefully created and projected at the public. They are presented as heroes, role models and, ultimately as idols.

Idolatry influences and often dictates lifestyle, because people are encouraged to live like their idols. Hollywood film stars smoked cigarettes, drank heavily, took drugs and indulged in promiscuity. This became a desirable lifestyle to be emulated.

The new idols exercise remarkable power over their followers. Wealth and possessions become all-important, sex and drug habits are celebrated by the media. Some journals, particularly those aimed at the young, are totally devoted to featuring and promoting **celebrities** as idols. The image of these celebrities is exploited globally to sell a variety of products. **Idolatry and mammon are closely linked.** In addition to celebrity idols, wealth, possessions, popularity, power and hedonistic pursuits themselves become idols.

A dominant influence on our culture is consumerism. Our shopping malls are contemporary versions of the cathedrals of the past. The worship of possessions takes precedence over the worship of God. Likewise, the expensive new sports arenas erected across the country are virtually temples. Vast numbers attend to give adoration to their sports heroes who are carefully presented as cult objects.

The idols we choose are a clear indication of our **priorities** in life. Because many are consciously or unconsciously seeking role models, the heroes who are raised up are blindly followed, although clearly, not all heroes become idols. Many popular idols of the past century even have their own shrines, which are visited by their own devotees.

Fuelled by highly organised commercial investment, many contemporary idols, such as the footballer David Beckham, exercise enormous power and attract mass adulation. In their day the Beatles were idolised by their fans and even boasted that they were more popular than Jesus.

The images of human or man-made idols have dominated history. At the time of the Early Church the proclamation was "Caesar is Lord". When the early Christians declared "**Jesus is Lord**", they were challenging the might of the great Roman Empire.

Tyrants and dictators have invariably sought to ensure that their subjects give them homage. From Hitler, Stalin, Mao, to Saddam Hussein and today's rulers of North Korea, millions have been obliged to idolise the ruling leader and bow down before him. Inevitably, this has led to ruthless persecution of Christian believers.

It is only gradually being recognised that today we do, in fact, live in an **age of idolatry**. The worship of God has been replaced by the worship of idols.

The message of God is clear - "**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...**" (Exodus 20,3,4; Deut. 5, 7,8)

In our culture we act as though God never speaks. We live as though He were absent, irrelevant or even non-existent. By doing this we are living a **lie**. There is a consequence to our action because God abominates idolatry. God declared that He would send fire upon Judah, "**because they had been led astray by false gods**" (Amos 2.4).

God warns Jeremiah – *“What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves ...”* (Jer. 1.5). Is God saying this to us today?

The overwhelming glory of God prompts Isaiah to *declare “Before him all the nations are as nothing”*. He then challenges his hearers *“To whom, then, will you compare God? What image will you compare Him to?”* (Is. 40.18)

The teaching of the Bible about idols is sharp and consistent. In the Book of Ezekiel the Sovereign Lord declares *“because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favour ...”* (Ez. 5.11)

There is always a consequence to idolatry. *“You have lifted up the shrine of your King, the pedestal of your idols, the star of your god – which you made for yourselves. Therefore, I will send you into exile ...”* (Amos 5.27)

The Bible depicts God as a jealous God angry in the face of idolatry. In the book of Nahum he warns – *“I will destroy the carved images and cast idols that are in the temple of your gods. I will prepare your grave, for you are vile”*. (Nahum 1.14)

If God is Lord of all He cannot tolerate idolatry. This truth is proclaimed in Isaiah about those who worship idols – *“They have chosen their own ways and their souls delight in their abominations; so I also will chose harsh treatment for them and will bring upon them what they dread. For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened. They did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me”*. (Is. 66.3 & 4)

In the days of the Early Church idols were seen to be absurd and the stark plea in the first Epistle from John is *“Keep yourselves from idols”*. (1 John 5:21)

When in Athens Paul was distressed to see the city was full of idols (Acts 17.16). He also noticed that one of their objects of worship was inscribed ‘to an unknown god’. (Acts 17.23). He therefore proclaimed *“Now what you worship as something unknown, I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands, and he is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, because He himself gives all men life and breath and everything else”*. (Acts 17.23-25).

Biblical teaching about the one true God is *“I am the Lord and there is no other”* (Is. 45.5). The sadness of God is revealed in the words *“They have turned their backs to me and not their faces”* (Jer. 2.27). Our relationship with God is all, or nothing. The command is simple. *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, with all your strength”* (Deut. 6.5).

Idolatry and blasphemy is always an offence and a provocation to God – *“Why have they provoked me to anger with their images, with their worthless foreign idols?”* (Jer. 8.19) *“All day long My name is constantly blasphemed”* (Is. 52.5). Idolatry and blasphemy go together. In our culture the names of God and Jesus are mocked and

ridiculed in a terrible way and the command of God is directly challenged - *“You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God”* (Ex. 20.7). *“God cannot be mocked”* (Gal. 6.7).

For the Hebrew, to worship an idol was a total abomination. Idolatry was equated with adultery. In conversion the believer *“turned to God from idols”* (1 Thess. 1.9). Idolatry negates the proper worship of God and the prophets constantly condemn it.

The Early Church was quite clear in its teaching – you cannot serve two masters, you cannot worship two Gods. One of the most important ‘gods’ in New Testament times as well as today is Mammon. **Jesus emphasises that it is impossible to serve Mammon and God at the same time** (Matt. 6.24).

Idols are often a tangible expression of demonic influences seeking to divert us from the worship of God. The projection of cult-images is a direct challenge to God.

Pergamon is described in the Bible as a centre of idolatry. Significantly, it is called the place ‘where satan has his throne’ and ‘where satan lives’ (Rev 2:13). Many contemporary cultures at the time of the Early Church were riddled with idolatry (1 Cor. 10.19-20, Rev. 9.20). The Greeks and Romans worshipped many gods and goddesses such as the god of Fire and the goddess of Beauty.

The Bible consistently associates idolatry with **immorality** and **untruth**. *“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator – who is forever praised, Amen”* (Romans 1.25).

The expulsion of God invariably means that idolatry occupies the place within our life which rightly belongs to God Himself. Many, most or even all human beings have an inherent need to worship. G.K. Chesterton said *“People think that when they do not believe in God they believe in nothing, but the fact is that they will believe in anything”*.

Idolatry seeks to dethrone God and put someone or something else in His place. We *“exchange the glory of the immortal God for images”* (Romans 1.23). This is an act of the utmost folly – **the creature denying the creator**. It is a rebellion against God, who breathed life into us.

*“The dearest idol I have known, Whate’er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne, And worship only Thee”*.

William Cowper

In a world of idolatry God calls us to worship only Him and to serve and love Him to the uttermost.

Dennis Wrigley