

## Keep Yourselves from Idols

Those of you who have been here at Faith for some time know that I grew up in Nebraska and have been a life-long Nebraska football fan. I went to my first game with dad in 1972. And so, it is something that I have enjoyed a lot since I was a little boy.

Some of you have heard me share this story before. In 1983 Nebraska had a team that was called the scoring explosion. The offense included Heisman trophy winner Mike Rozier, and Heisman candidates Turner Gill and Irving Fryer. Throughout that year they put up 84 points against Minnesota, 63 vs. Syracuse, 69 vs. Colorado, 72 vs. Iowa St., 67 vs. Kansas and so on. Many considered it one of the best teams ever at Nebraska. As a sophomore in college, I was pretty wrapped up in it.

Nebraska was ranked number one when they played Miami in the Orange Bowl on January 2, 1984 for the national championship. They were a huge favorite, but ended up losing by one point when a two point conversion was unsuccessful. I was devastated by the loss. The very next Sunday at church, John McNeil, the pastor of the Free church up in Kearney that I attended, said this: "Well, the idol got knocked off the shelf, didn't it?" At first his statement made me mad. Where was the compassion? Where was the sympathy? But eventually I had to agree. Nebraska football was an idol in my heart. It has at times occupied a place in my heart that it should never occupy. Trust me, I don't struggle with this being an idol so much after the past 20 years.

Now, you might not care anything about sports and so it might seem silly that a game could occupy such a place in one's heart. But the truth of the matter is that there are many things that can slide into a place in our hearts that God alone should occupy. It might be money, or success, or a hobby, or a spouse, or our kids, or any number of other good things. We all have tendency to allow things other than God to reign supreme in our hearts.

Today, as we wrap up our study of 1 John we are looking at the very last verse. Six brief words that invite us to look at our hearts and what resides. This verse may seem a random thought tagged on to the end of this letter, and yet I believe that it is how John wants to drive home the message to his readers and to us to live for what is true. He has been describing how we can have a confident faith based on who Jesus is and what he has done. Jesus Christ and our Heavenly Father, they are real. They are true. They are what John wants us to live for. To live for anything else is to live for an idol.

And so, we are going look at this verse to understand what John was saying to his original audience and then with that understanding we will seek to apply this command to us in our current context.

### I. John's Final Command: Keep Yourselves from Idol

<sup>21</sup> *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*

In this final admonition, John again uses this term of endearment, *little children*, to address his readers. From the heart of a spiritual father, he appeals to them - *keep yourselves from idols*.

As we consider what John is saying here, it is important to see it in context of what he said in the preceding verse that Steve looked at last week. Let me read verse 20:

*<sup>20</sup> 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.*

We know what is true! Jesus is the true God. Jesus is eternal life. Life is found in Him and Him alone. He is the real thing. And so in light of this, *keep yourself from idols*. Keep yourself from what is not true; what is not real!

Now, what exactly is John talking about here? He could be talking about literal idols. Certainly, the church, existing in the first century Roman world, was surrounded by literal idols. Some believe that John's readers were in churches around Ephesus. If so, they would have been aware of Artimas (aka., Diana) the goddess of the Ephesians that we read about in Acts 19 (vv. 23ff). The temple of Diana was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world. The making and selling of idols was one of the big occupations there. And so there certainly could have been pressure to worship those idols.

John may also be speaking metaphorically, which I think makes more sense considering what John has said in the letter. The false teachers that he has confronted in the letter, were putting forth a false view of Jesus and essentially in that they were presenting an alternative God. And so to follow the teaching of the successionists would have been to buy into something not true; not real. An idol.

Paul talked about metaphorical idols. For instance, in Colossians 3:5 he says:

*<sup>5</sup> Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.*

Paul says that covetousness, a desire to possess material things, is idolatry. It's not a literal idol, but an idol nonetheless. Ultimately, I don't think we have to figure out whether John had in mind literal or non-literal idols. He is warning us against all idols.

And because there are idols, John says *keep yourselves* from them. He is urging that we be watchful. We cannot be passive. This is a life-long watchfulness that we need to keep. Calvin said that "Man's nature . . . is a perpetual factory of idols" (Institutes, 1.11.8) and since this is true, we can never let our guard down.

The verse is easy to understand, right? There are idols and we need to keep ourselves from them. Easy to understand; harder to obey. What I want to do in the rest of our time is give you a

simple definition of an idol, and then think about some of the things that fall into that category for us. And finally, I want to talk about how we can keep ourselves from them. And so, what is an idol?

## II. What is an Idol?

In the first of the 10 Commandments, God said that we should have no other gods before Him (Ex. 20:3). In establishing His covenant with Israel, God demanded their exclusive worship and loyalty. And so, if they worshipped or gave their loyalty to anything other than God, that was an idol. And if you know your Old Testament, you know this was a really big problem.

God is to reign as the supreme thing in our hearts. He demands and deserves our exclusive worship and loyalty. This isn't because He is some tyrant, who just wants to be in charge; it is because He is the Creator and we are the created. And when we keep this relationship right, with God in charge and the object of our worship, that's where we truly find life. And so here is how I would define an idol: **An idol is anything we love, trust, serve, or pursue more than God.**

In our culture, literal idols that sit on shelves are less of an issue, right? But idols that sit in our hearts, are everywhere. And so that's where I'm going to focus our attention. What are some of these things that we love, trust, serve or pursue more than God? Well, there can be sinful things, like covetousness that Paul talked about that can become idols in our hearts. But idols are not just sinful things; good things can become idols as well. God has blessed us with many things to enjoy and when in their rightful place, they are good. But if we are not careful, they can slide into a place in our hearts that alone is reserved for God.

Let me mention a few possibilities. And as I do, I would love for you to sort of whisper in your heart, "Holy Spirit, show me if any of these things have become an idol in my life. Do I love, trust, serve, or pursue any of these things more than you, God?"

And so, how about your family – your spouse or your children? Obviously, family is so important and a beautiful gift, but is there any way where you are putting your wife, or your husband, or your children before God? Or if you are not married, has the desire for a relationship become the thing you seek most? Is the person you are dating in that place in your heart?

What about your work and career? Are you pursuing these more than God? What about your pursuit of money and possessions? Have these things become your god? Do you love them more, do you pursue them more, than your relationship with Christ?

When I think about the place money has in my life, I know it is an idol in my heart. It's not that I'm driven to have a lot of money. I've never cared about being wealthy. But I do look to money to give me security. And so, as I think about our definition of an idol, I have to admit that it is so easy for me to trust money more than God for my security. And so when unexpected expenses come up I often get anxious, and the reason why is I'm trusting money more for my security, than God.

By the way, looking at your strong emotions can be a helpful way to discern idols. My anxiety over money issues should cause me to pause and reflect on what is going on. And when I do, I realize it is because I'm looking to money for my security. It has become an idol. And so, pay attention to your strong emotions – fear or anger or whatever. We often experience these emotions when our idols are threatened.

Okay, how about some other possible idols? How about pleasure? God gives us good things to enjoy, but has the pursuit of those things become an idol in your life? Do you seek these things more than God? Food. Sports. Gaming. Exercise. Alcohol. Sleep. Your smart phone.

What about the church? Is there any way that the church and your service in the church has become more important to you than God Himself? Has your desire to make a difference in this world become more important than God? Do you pursue serving God more than God Himself?

How about politics? We are called to be good citizens and I believe that being active politically is one way that we can do that. But is there any way where you are trusting a political party, or a certain politician, or political platform more than you trust God for your future? When I see how Christians at times make assumptions about another believer's commitment to Jesus based on political affiliation, it seems that maybe politics have become an idol. We are called to love God and one another, and yet, when I see friendships between believers broken because can't give grace to each other to have different political view, it seems to me that a political view, not God, is what is supreme in our hearts.

Now this is just a short list of things we should consider. I would encourage each of us to invite God to search our hearts. Take time to sit in silence and ask God, "What are the idols of my heart?" At the end of my sermon manuscript, I've listed some questions that you can use to help you uncover any idols of your heart. You can find the manuscript posted on the website on Monday.

### III. How Do We Keep Ourselves from Idols?

And so, if we come to understand that we have idols, what do we do? How do we remove the idol from our heart? And how do we keep them from taking that place in our hearts in the first place. How do we keep ourselves from idols?

Well, like any other area where we stray from God's will, once we recognize it, we **confess it to God**. That's the invitation John gave back in 1 John 1:9. If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. And so, confess it to God.

Secondly, **become captivated by Jesus Christ and God our Father**. He is the truth. He is what is real. I think anytime something takes God's place in our hearts a big part of the reason is we have an insufficient view of God. I worry about money, because I fail to see God as the perfect Father and Provider that He is.

And so, how do we become captivated by Jesus and God our Father? At the heart of this is simply engaging the core spiritual practices of the Christian life.

**Spend time in God's Word regularly.** God has spoken to us through His Word. This is His self-revelation. Go regularly to the scriptures to learn and be reminded of God's greatness, His love, His goodness, His wisdom, His power, His faithfulness. Let your mind be occupied and filled with these truths. If we don't let the scriptures form our view of God, then we will be left with our best imaginations about God, which will be woefully inadequate and inaccurate.

Second, **worship corporately and privately.** One definition of worship is "the awed response to the saving acts and praiseworthy character of God" (*Worship*, Lexham Theological Wordbook). One of the reasons we gather week in, and week out is that as we worship, we are reminded of God's saving acts and praiseworthy character. And as we worship Him, it pulls our affections off our idols and puts them on God.

Third, **live in biblical community.** Anytime we are disconnected from biblical community it is dangerous. We need each other to stay connected and seeking the One True God. We need the accountability of committed friends who will call us out when they see us loving, trusting, serving, or pursuing things other than God.

Finally, **remember the cross.** As we look to the cross, we see God's great love for us. Romans 8:31-32 says:

*<sup>31</sup> What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?*

*<sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

If we know that God did not spare His own son, but gave him up for us, we know that He will give us everything we truly need. And if we are convinced of this, it can help us keep ourselves from idols, because we know that God will give us what we truly need.

Today, as we come to the Lord's Table, remember the cross. Remember that since God gave us the greatest good of His son, He will graciously give us all things. Use this time to remember. Use this time to invite God to reveal the idols of your heart. Use this time to confess the idols of your heart.

---

### Questions to Help Identify Idols

1. What is my hope for the future?
2. What do I worry about most?
3. What, if I failed or lost it, would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live?
4. What do I use to comfort myself when things go bad or get difficult?
5. What do I do to cope? What are my release valves? What do I do to feel better?
6. What preoccupies me? What do I daydream about?
7. What makes me feel the most self-worth? Of what am I the proudest? For what do I want to be known?
8. What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?
9. What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?
10. What are my strongest emotions (such as fear or anger)? We often respond with strong emotions when our idols are threatened.
11. What controls me?
12. Whose approval do I most seek?
13. What sin or sins do I constantly battle? Whatever we worship, whatever we love more than God, we will sin to obtain it.