

OpenTheo

Idolatry



Individual Topics - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg examines the concept of idolatry beyond the worship of physical statues or images. He emphasizes that idolatry could manifest in various forms, including love of possessions, pleasure, and self-worship. The effects of idolatry can hinder God's intervention and are offensive to Him, and Christians should guard themselves against it. Steve points out that being conscious of idols in our lives and ensuring that they align with God's values is crucial, and being humble and content could help cut down pride and idolatry.

Transcript

For the past couple of weeks, there's been a recurring scripture come to my mind, and you know when you're a preacher, it's not clear when a scripture comes to your mind if it's something you're supposed to preach about, or if it's just something that's coming to your mind because God wants you to contemplate it, for it to be God's message to you. I mean, obviously every Christian has times when God quickens a scripture of some sort to their mind for their own personal benefit, or exhortation, or correction. And so, because I do preach all the time, it's hard for me sometimes when I get a scripture to my mind to know whether this is something just for me, or whether it's something for me to preach, or teach.

This scripture actually had come to my mind before last Sunday, and I knew I was going to be preaching last Sunday, but I didn't feel that it was for me to share then. And I, just the last few days, since I found out I was going to speak this week also, I was praying about this, and I sensed that this is a scripture for me to share from today, so I would like for you to turn with me to a very short scripture, very easy to find, it's the very last verse in 1 John. 1 John is a short book, and for that reason I expect most of you have read it through probably at one sitting in the past.

And when you do, when you do read through the book of 1 John and you come to the last verse, it's surprising really, because the last verse does not have any obvious connection to anything in the previous part of the book. The book has several themes that recur as you read through, especially the themes of obedience to God and love for your neighbor

and certain other important themes that John hits several times as you read through, you'll see them again and again. And then at the very end, in verse 21 of chapter 5, he says, little children, keep yourselves from idols.

Which, as I say, is a surprising ending, because the book has not had any appearance of being a book about idolatry. And it may be that John was just running out of parchment and he realized he had to wind it down real fast and he had intended to write something about idolatry as well, but realized he didn't have much space so he just said it in one line. I don't really know what caused him to do this, but it is a very important exhortation and it is so much the more when we consider God's utter abhorrence to all idols.

Now, when we think of idols, we might think of statues made of wood or stone, maybe overlaid with gold. This is the way that idols were made in ancient times. Less enlightened times, I suppose we could say, when people thought that everything had a spirit in it.

There are still people like that in certain tribal groups. The religion is called animism. The idea is that there is a spirit in the rocks and a spirit in the trees and a spirit in the mountains and so forth.

This is a very unenlightened view of the nature of God's world, but many tribal people and many ancient peoples would carve these stones and sticks into images of people or of animals and would bow down to them and worship the spirit that was thought to be in them and would call out to these spirits. Now, you might think of this as being a really strange thing to do and that you might think only your remote tribal African villagers would do such a thing today and that may be for the most part true, although there are religions, Hinduism and so forth, that command the loyalty of millions of people in the world, billions even, which do have idols they bow down to. There are people in this country who actually bow down to images, but this is not the only form of idolatry.

We might smugly say, well, I have done what this says. I've kept myself from idols. I've never had a carved image.

Maybe when I was a kid I had one of these little carved tikis or something or some other little Buddha or something on my mantle, but now that I'm a Christian I don't have those kinds of silly superstitious things and so I don't have idols in my life. But as a matter of fact, there was a time in Israel's history when they didn't have idols in their lives either, at least not outwardly, and this is because God had punished them for their idolatry. God's very offended by idolatry, the scripture indicates, and he had sent them into Babylon because of it.

And in Ezekiel 14, those exiles in Babylon, those Jews who were there, had ceased to worship outward idols, but God spoke to Ezekiel the prophet and indicated that they had not forsaken idolatry inwardly. In Ezekiel 14, verses 1 through 3, says, Now some of the

elders of Israel came to me, this was in Babylon, Ezekiel himself was an exile there, and sat before me and the word of the Lord came to me saying, Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts and put before them that which causes them to stumble into iniquity. Should I let myself be inquired of at all by them? The last question of course is rhetorical, it suggests that God does not see it as appropriate that he should be inquired of by these people.

Now these people don't have any statues in their houses anymore, but they have idols in their hearts. And those idols, it says, cause them to stumble into iniquity. There is weakness in the modern church in America, I think we would all have to agree with that, and most of us would have to even bring it down home more and say there is weakness in my spiritual life.

Do I stumble into iniquity? I do. Do you? Probably. Is there a failure of God to act upon some of the things that we have prayed for? I shouldn't say it that way because it makes it sound like God is the one at fault to say there is a failure of God, but I mean, do we pray and see no results? Sometimes.

How many years have we been praying for revival? I don't know if you pray for revival, I've been praying for revival for decades. There are certain people I've been praying for their salvation for decades and they're not saved yet and it hasn't come yet. And I think, well, the Bible says, there are promises that God will answer our prayers, but God said, shall I be inquired of by people who have idols? In their hearts even? Now I know that we don't have idols that we bow down to in an outward form of obeisance, but we do, no doubt, have a tendency to slip into idolatry.

Now, this might seem like a hard word if we did not have it the way that John put it. John said, little children, keep yourselves from idols. He's not scolding, he's warning.

He's talking to the church as if we were small children in a world that's got dangers that we have not yet discovered or of which we're not yet wary. It's like a child, you know, you have a family come over to visit, they've never been to your house before and they've got little kids and you say, oh, stay away from that lagoon over there. You know, if you fall into the lagoon, it's a very unpleasant experience.

And there are many things that we have to warn children about, not because we're angry at them, not because we want to be hard on them, but because we know there are dangers to which they are naive and they are uninformed and to which they may inadvertently slip. And it is in that spirit that John addresses the church and says, little children, keep yourselves from idols. The idea of keeping yourself from idols is something that goes back to Acts chapter 15 when the Jerusalem council met to decide what kinds of restrictions should be placed on the Gentile converts.

There were some who wanted to impose the entire Jewish law upon them, including

circumcision and the rest, and the council of the apostles decided eventually that it was not necessary for these people to all be brought under the Jewish law at all. However, there were a few things that they were told to avoid. And they were told to avoid meat sacrifice to idols, which is idolatry essentially, and things strangled and blood and fornication.

And it said, if you keep yourselves from these, this is a letter they wrote to him, if you keep yourselves from these, you shall do well. Keep yourselves, among other things, from idols. And so John, who was one of those apostles of the council, writes to the church at a later date and says, keep yourselves from idols.

Now, I should not think we who are Christians should have to be warned about keeping ourselves from idols, but idolatry is a subtle thing. And idolatry is subtle and dangerous because idolatry never, or almost never, involves something that in itself is entirely bad. Some people idolize food, but food is not in itself bad.

Some people idolize sex, but that in itself is not bad either. It's simply taking something that is good and placing it in a position that it does not rightfully hold in God's economy. Even the making of images is not in itself bad.

I know you might think that it is because God said in Exodus chapter 20 and verse 4, do not make any graven images. However, it is clear that God's intention on this was that they should not make graven images with the intention of bowing down to them and worshipping them. We can see that very plainly in Exodus chapter 20 and verses 4 and 5. It says, you shall not make for yourself a carved image, 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 nor serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am jealous, a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. Now, you might say, well, Steve, you just said that it's not wrong to make images, but it says not to make images, it also says not to bow down to them, but how do you know it's okay to make them if you don't bow down to them? Well, God commanded that images be made in some cases. Images of the cherubim were put on the mercy seat.

Images of the cherubim were embroidered on the curtains of the tabernacle. There was an image of a serpent that God commanded Moses to make on one occasion. None of these were to be objects of worship.

One of them became one, by the way. The serpent actually became an object of worship in generations later than Moses so that Josiah had to destroy the thing because people had begun to burn incense to it. But there was nothing wrong with the making of the brazen serpent.

It's not the making of an image that's wrong, it's making of an image and then that becoming an object of worship that is wrong. So, even the worship of idols is not itself the worship of something that is in itself wrong. An image is not in itself wrong.

Whenever something, an image or anything else is elevated to be above God or to be a rival to God in your life, then that is idolatry and the thing becomes positive evil. And not only evil, very offensive to God and to anybody who feels similarly to the way God feels about things. I mean, look what he says, he's a jealous God.

Why doesn't God want us to worship idols? Why doesn't he want us to have idols in our lives? Well, he's jealous over us. You see, the Bible indicates that God feels toward his people and is toward his people the way a husband is toward a wife. In fact, if you want to see how God views idolatry and the gut feelings he has about it, sometime when your children aren't there, read Ezekiel 16 or Ezekiel 23, where God compares Israel, who had become idolatrous and had therefore come under God's judgment, with a beautiful woman that God himself had married and had made covenantal relationship with.

And then she goes out and she sells herself or she goes out and simply plays the harlot. And the imagery that God uses is very unpretty. I mean, it's really grotesque actually.

Many people would advise you not to have your teenagers read those chapters. But the fact is, when God sees his people worshipping idols to him that's identical to a husband seeing his wife commit adultery. And if you think that God shouldn't be so jealous, then if you're a husband or a wife, think of whether you'd be jealous if the spouse to which you've been faithful went out and was promiscuous, without shame, publicly.

Well, that's exactly the position God is placed in by his people when they have idols in their lives. And this is what he objects to so much. But it's not just because of his own concern about his own rights to our fidelity, but he's also concerned about us.

The Bible indicates that idols cannot help you. And people generally in history, when they look to idols, they do so, of course, instead of looking to God. Or if they look to idols and God, God pays no attention because he doesn't share his wife with others.

And in Jeremiah chapter two, in complaining against the idolatry of the people of Judah, God says this, for my people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Now, God is the fountain of living waters.

He's a source of refreshment and life to his people. That's how he intends for it to be. But they have forsaken him and replaced him with other gods from which they drink, from which they gather their refreshment and their life and so forth.

But he said these cisterns, these other gods are like broken cisterns, cisterns that are cracked and the water eventually leaks out. They can't hold any water. They can't

sustain life.

They cannot replace God. They are not profitable to those who seek after them. And so in the same chapter, Jeremiah chapter two, in verse twenty eight, God challenges Judah and says, but where are your gods that you have made for yourselves? Let them arise if they can save you in the time of trouble.

For according to the number of your cities are your gods, O Judah. Let your gods save you now, he says, when your trouble comes upon you. Now, God makes it clear throughout his word that he's more than capable and willing to save his people from any trouble.

There's no trouble can arise against God's people that he is has any difficulty saving them from or bringing them through safely. But he says your gods can't help you. You worship a stick and then you cry out to the stick for deliverance.

It cannot do anything for you. It's not alive. It cannot profit you.

And this is another reason why God objects to idolatry besides the spitting in his face or the slap in the face that it is to him when his people commit harlotry with other gods and worship others than himself. It also is harmful to them. It puts them at the mercy of a God who cannot help them in a really dangerous world.

And there's another reason, I think, why God detests idolatry in Psalm 115. In Psalm 115, beginning with verse three, the psalmist says, but our God is in heaven. He does whatever he pleases.

Their idols are silver and gold, the works of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak. Eyes they have, but they do not see.

They have ears, but they do not hear. Noses they have, but they do not smell. They have hands, but they do not handle.

Feet they have, but they do not walk. Nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them.

So is everyone who trusts in them. That is, those who worship idols become like the idols they worship. In fact, I think it is inevitable that people will take on the image of whatever they worship.

If you worship Jehovah God, if you worship Jesus Christ, you will be changed from glory to glory into that same image. If you worship a deaf and dumb and stupid God, you'll become spiritually deaf, spiritually dumb, spiritually blind, and definitely very stupid. And those who worship them are like them.

I can see this very well in children, sometimes my own children. One of the great idols of

our own culture is entertainment and videos, for example. And we don't watch an awful lot of videos, really.

We probably watch more than some Christians do, but we watch a lot less than probably most of the Christians we know do. But there's a good reason for that. One reason is that whatever video we watch, some of our children immediately and inadvertently take on the persona of the hero in the story.

The hero might not even be really a genuinely good person by Christian standards, might be better than the bad guy, but I mean, they don't even do this on purpose. It's just something that they take on the image of the one that they admire in the video. And although my children don't do this, a lot of children, you know, they take on the image of the rock stars that they admire.

You know, what you idolize, the persons you look up to. They start to dress like them, they start to wear their hair like them, they start to walk and talk like them. This is why God doesn't want us worshipping false gods, because he wants us to become like him, and there's no other God like him.

And if we worship him alone, we will become like him. But if we worship other gods, we will be transformed into the image of something base, something less than is our destiny, less than what he desires, less than like Christ. Now, I want to talk to you a little bit about some of the idols in our society, and I do so realizing that there will be some here, myself included, who will have to be convicted a bit when some of these idols are named.

In fact, I'd be very surprised if anyone here got away totally unscathed. I know I shall not. But I say this not to be convicting, really, not to be, certainly not to be condemning, but rather like John saying, my little children, there's some dangers here, can easily be missed.

We slip into idolatry too easily because the thing that we begin to idolize was not wrong when we first began to appreciate it. It was a thing that was in itself not an evil. There's nothing wrong with a car, but some people idolize cars.

There's nothing wrong with money, really, but the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And so, when you begin to set your heart on that which God has given, not for you to set your heart on, but for you to use in His service, in His glory, then your heart begins to idolize something, then it becomes an evil. And it's a fine line, in many cases, to know when that has happened.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be healthy. I think everybody wants to be healthy, and health is a good thing. I mean, certainly the Bible indicates health is a good thing, but we live in a culture that practically idolizes health.

It's as if being young forever, being healthy, is worth sacrificing anything else for. And this is one of the things that we identify an idol by. It's something you will sacrifice other things for.

And in fact, what is it to worship an idol? You might say, well, I've got some nice cars, but I don't worship cars. Or I've got, you know, I watch videos, but I don't worship videos. I mean, how do I know if what I'm doing is really idolatry towards something that I really like? Well, I think there are some tests that really will help you know.

One is, an idol is something that replaces God in some role that God Himself jealously claims in your life. For example, if you trust in something more than you trust in God, that is an idol. The thing that most people trust in in our society is money.

Not just money in my pocket, but money in the bank, money in some kind of treasury bill, money in some kind of retirement account. My security is in that. And if it is in that and not in God, then it is an idol.

Now, I'm not saying you can't have any retirement put away. I'm just saying if your security, if your trust is in that instead of in God, then your trust is in an idol. And you can know if it's that way by, for example, contemplating what you would do if the economy went under and everything you'd invested in was gone.

Would you still say, well, hey, still got the Lord. I've always had Him. I've got the Lord.

How can anything go wrong? I mean, there are people who live that way. You might think that's not realistic in this modern world. Well, then you need to be delivered from this modern world.

It says in Galatians that Christ died so He could deliver us from this wicked world. And I'll tell you what, there are some things that aren't possible in this wicked world. You can't get along without a college education in this wicked world, but maybe we're not supposed to get along in this wicked world.

Maybe we're supposed to be an alternative society living lives with different values in a wicked world and shining as lights in a dark age. I believe we're supposed to. And there are many things that the world has told us you have to have, you have to seek, you have to make sure that you acquire and hold on to these things.

And the Bible doesn't agree with it. It's just, we don't have to take our cues from the world about these things. Believe me, the world is idolatrous.

It's as idolatrous in America as it was among the Canaanites who offered their children to Molech. It's just different things they're offering their children to. And so there are gods that we need to beware of.

If you trust in something more than God, that's a sign that that thing has become an idol to you. If you value a thing more than you value God. Now I know a lot of people who say, well, I, I don't value anything more than I value God.

I mean, I might like, you know, whatever it is, my stamp collection, but I don't value that more than God. I mean, if it came, people would say, you know, listen, if it came down to giving up God or giving up my stamp collection, I give up the stamp collection. All right.

Well, that's no real big indicator of whether that's an idol to you or not, because an idol is not necessarily something that you would give up before you would give up God. An idol is something you would give, not give up before you give up the will of God in your life. In other words, if you believed it was the will of God, if you had even the slightest hint that it was the will of God for you to part with a thing, but you would get very nervous and break into a cold sweat and begin to make excuses why this, you know, it couldn't be God's will to get rid of this.

I mean, if you begin to feel this way toward a thing, then maybe you value it more than you value the will of God. If you value something more than you value the will of God or if you trust in something more than you trust in God, that has become an idol to you. And I would dare say there's another thing, too, and that is that if you have more affection or you're drawn to something more than you're drawn to God, and this is a really hard one for Christians, because most of us, even who do trust in God, I think, and most of us who really want the will of God more than we want anything else, a lot of that is kind of, you know, that doesn't really impinge on our emotions.

But what is really what draws us, what attracts us most is our God, really. I mean, it may not be God, it may be something else, but if you're attracted more to that than to God, then it becomes an idol to you. And one way you can know that's true is, again, you marry people.

Just ask yourself, how would you feel about knowing that your husband was attracted to some other woman more than you? Now, he still, he doesn't do that woman's will. He still does your will. He still doesn't trust that woman to raise his kids, he trusts you to raise his kids, but he's more attracted to her than he's more attracted to you.

Would that be a satisfactory arrangement for you? Or husbands, put it the other way around. If you know that your wife is more attracted to your neighbor than she is to you, I mean, she's loyal to you, but she's just, she's more drawn to him than to you. Well, you might say that can't be avoided, perhaps.

Some husbands and wives aren't as attractive, but it is the duty, I believe, of husbands and wives to find their mate most attractive. There are others who will be maybe naturally more attractive, but we have to choose where we will give our hearts. We can choose to be attracted to many things that we don't naturally find attractive.

You can learn to eat foods that you didn't like very much initially, and you can actually learn to enjoy them. You might think that's theoretical, but it's true. I've tested that out.

It can be done. And so also, you can learn to be, if it's your determination, I'm going to be attracted to this person and not these people, you can do that. That doesn't mean you won't ever have any temptation, another way.

God knows we have temptations for other things besides Him. But our attraction, if our attraction is fully to Him as opposed to something else, you can tell by these ways. First of all, where your thoughts go most often.

What do you think of most when you have time to think about whatever you wish? Now, sometimes on your job you have no choice but to think about the figures you have to write out, or you're working, you have to think about that. But when you have time to think about whatever you want, do you think all the time about going fishing? Do you think all the time about money? Do you think all the time about women? Do you think all the time about something else? Are your thoughts drawn to think about God? Because you do naturally think about the things that delight you to think about. The thing that you have the greatest attraction to, you will think about most naturally when you're not compelled to think about something else.

Another way you can tell if your affection and your attraction is to God or to something else more is by how your money is spent. That would be your elective money. By elective money I mean the money you don't need to pay your essential bills, the money you use for having fun or for whatever you do with it.

If your money is spent on some enterprise or some pursuit more than on the Kingdom of God, then it seems to me likely that your attraction is to that pursuit and you value that pursuit more than you value the Kingdom of God. To me that's a very objective test. It's hard for me to tell you, I can't just walk up to you and say, I think you love X more than you love God, because I don't see your heart.

But anyone can look at your checkbook. Anyone can see what you do with your money. And really if someone could watch you all the time, they could see what you do with your time.

Do you worship entertainment? No, I don't worship entertainment. Well, how much time do you spend in entertainment as opposed to spending time seeking God? People sometimes complain that God seems far away from them. Well, He hides Himself from those who worship other idols.

He's not going to be inquired of in the same way by an idolatrous wife, an adulterous wife in His view, as He is by a faithful servant. That's biblical. I mean, that's what He says.

And if God seems far away, guess what? You can get closer. I was reading to my family last night some things from A. W. Tozer, and we didn't read this statement, but we were talking after we read what he said about how do you get closer to God. And I remember that Tozer had said once, and I believe that he's correct, he said he thinks every man is just as close to God as he really wants to be.

There is nothing that prevents a person from drawing near to God, whether he's in a prison cell, whether he's in a church, whether he's in a busy office, whether he's in an unhappy home, wherever he may be, whether he's in his car. But it's a lot easier to turn on the radio and listen to talk radio or country music or something else than to keep the radio off and just think about the things of God, and draw near to God, and to pray. You might say, well, that sounds kind of boring to me.

Well, then, we know what you're attracted to, don't we? And what you're not attracted to. That's just the point. That's exactly my point.

If you think that contemplating God, if you think that prayer, if you think that meditating on Scripture is boring, well, that answers the question immediately. Are you more attracted to God or to something else? You're obviously attracted to something else. If you find God boring, I'll guarantee you there's something you don't find boring, and that's your idol.

Now, idols and God do not get along. In fact, idolaters and God don't get along. We read in Exodus 20, when he said, don't bow down and worship images, he said, for I'm a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation.

I realize there's a lot of Christians who understand that Scripture to be relevant to something they call generational sin or bondages that are passed down from generation to generation. I'm not sure that that is the correct way to understand the expression. When he says, I visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children of the third and fourth generation, visiting the iniquity doesn't mean the children do the same sins.

That's what some people apparently think it means. They're not familiar with the Hebrew idiom. When God visits somebody's iniquity upon them, it means he judges them.

When he visits the iniquity of the fathers on the children, it means the children undergo the effects of God's judgment for sins of the fathers, and even down to the third and fourth generation. I personally think that that statement in Exodus predicted the Babylonian exile because children of Israel for three and four generations had to endure exile in Babylon because of the idolatry of their parents, of their ancestors, and God made good on his threats. And although God did restore the remnant from Babylon, there were certainly many who suffered because of the idolatry of Israel.

And there will be suffering if there's idolatry in your life. Now, I said you can know if you have an idol by what your time and money on. Another thing is on what you'll sacrifice your children to.

In the Old Testament, God complained frequently because the Jews, when they worshipped idols, didn't just worship them, they sacrificed their children to them. And of course you will. Your children are that thing which is most naturally valuable to you.

And the thing that you want to devote your children to is the thing that you worship the most, the thing that you value the most, unless you don't like your kids. But Jesus said even earthly fathers who are evil know how to give good gifts to their children. So you naturally do for your children what you consider to be good for them.

And you judge what is good for them by what you consider to be ultimate good. And what you consider to be ultimate good is your God. And if you believe that Jehovah God is the ultimate good, then you want nothing more that your children will be holy and righteous and pure and that they would serve God every day of their life.

John said, in 2 John, he said, I have no greater joy than to find that my children walk in the truth. That is the proof that you love the truth, if you have no greater joy but that your children walk in it. Now a lot of people have other things they want for their children.

They want their children to be Christians, of course, but they want their children to be successful in the world. Or they want their children to be happy. They want their children to be happy.

Now, of course, I want my children to be happy. Who doesn't? But the question is, what will you sacrifice your children to? Now, for example, not everyone here probably homeschools and I'm not saying everybody has to homeschool. But I will say this, people who do homeschool usually just because they have a conviction that that's best for their children, that they can best not only educate but direct their children's lives in the ways of God.

But I have known people who believe all that and who do homeschool until it comes to be a choice between homeschooling and participation in sports or homeschooling and participation in some other entertaining activity. And I've known families who otherwise had convictions to homeschool, but then their convictions flew out the window as soon as their kids got old enough to play in team sports and they thought they'd have more fun if they went to public school and played team sports. To me, that tells what your idol is.

I mean, if you'll say, I really believe that homeschooling is better for my kids, but sports is really more important than that to me. And you say, Preacher, you've stopped

preaching and gone to meddling. Well, the fact is, the purpose of preaching is to be meddling.

As a matter of fact, I hope that you understand that many people come to church with the understanding that they're going to get another shot in the arm to make it through the next week and then come back and get another one next Sunday and so forth. And the preacher better have something nice and inspirational to say every week so that they can make it through the next week without any more input than that. But I hope you understand the purpose of the preaching of the Word is not to give you a shot in the arm to help you make it through another week.

The purpose of preaching of the Word of God is to change your mind, to impact your life permanently so that you can say, my life needs to be redirected in the ways of God. And it needs to be permanently redirected, not just to make it through the next week until I get another inspirational talk from the pulpit. But the purpose of the preaching is that our minds will be transformed, or that we would be transformed by the renewing of our minds through the Word of God.

And we need to recognize that there are things that God wants to transform in our lives that we would count positively meddling. I remember reading a secular article once where the author said something like, things have come to a pretty pass when religion is made to interfere with our personal lives. Well, that's how a lot of people feel about it, but it's supposed to interfere with everything in your life.

You're supposed to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, all your strength. And that doesn't leave any room for not loving Him. That doesn't leave any other category of your life where He's allowed to be left out.

He's meddling. I'm meddling in my wife's life too. I changed her whole life when I married her.

Not entirely for the good probably, but the fact is she has to live with it. And there's nothing in her life that isn't changed because she married me. And there's nothing in your life that God doesn't want changed because you are in covenant with Him.

And if you share Him with other gods, He won't find that acceptable at all. He'll be angry as a matter of fact. The Bible does indicate there is such a thing as the wrath of God.

And Paul said, knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men. And in his day, what does he persuade them to do? To turn from worthless idols, to serve the living and the true God. I'd like you to turn to 1 John chapter 2 because it was in 1 John that we encountered this exhortation initially, keep yourselves from idols.

There is a passage in 1 John chapter 2 that may well summarize the idols of the world that we are to keep ourselves from. Certainly the idols of our society. And when I see an

audience like this, I assume most of them are Christians.

Perhaps all are Christians here. But it may be that there are some here who are not Christians. It may be some who were dragged along against their will.

My Christian friends or family. And I just, I want this message to be equally applicable to Christians or to non-Christians. Because one thing a non-Christian is doing wrong is that they're not putting God and His will as the total occupation of their lives.

But that's the same thing a lot of Christians are doing wrong. So I mean the message is applicable to Christians and to non-Christians. And there are idols in our society that at least Christians in theory are committed to avoiding.

But sometimes we slit into the lagoon. And so we need to be warned and we need to be shown where the dangerous spots are. In 1 John chapter 2 verses 15 through 17.

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. For if any man loved the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life is not of the Father, but is of the world.

And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever. Now doing the will of God is obviously contrary to loving the world. The world passeth away, but he that does the will of God will abide forever.

Now what are the things in the world? The idolatrous things that we're not to love. If you love them, the love of God is not in you. Obviously these are idols.

If you love something instead of loving him. Now by the way, if you love them and him, depending on what we call love, I mean it can be an idolatry. We read sometimes of the Israelites that they served Jehovah and feared other gods.

That wasn't any more acceptable than not serving Jehovah at all. Elijah the prophet came to Israel at a time like that and said, how long are you going to halt between two opinions if Jehovah is God, serve him, and if Baal is God, serve him? You might as well, if you're going to serve idols, don't fool yourself into thinking it's okay between you and God. I mean, go for the idols.

If Baal is God, serve Baal. But if Jehovah is God, throw out Baal and his prophets and serve Jehovah. Well, what is the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life? The lust of the flesh essentially refers to the love of pleasure, especially sensuous pleasure, but pleasure.

And it says in 2 Timothy 3, 4 that men will be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. Now, if you love something more than you love God, what is that? That's an idol, right? Lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God. The lust of the flesh or the desires of the

flesh is your love of pleasure.

Now, when we think of the lust of the flesh, perhaps the first thing we think of is sexual sin because it's so rampant in our society and people who are throwing off the restraints of what God says about sexual conduct are obviously guilty of following the lust of the flesh. But there are other lusts of the flesh. The pleasure of the palate is every bit as big a problem in our society as is the love of eros, of sex.

It's just a little more respectable. Now, when I say love of the palate, I'm not saying we aren't supposed to enjoy good food. The Bible says God has given us all things richly to enjoy in 1 Timothy 6. Paul said that.

And there's nothing wrong with enjoyment. It's a question of whether something takes up all of our thoughts, takes up all of our time, all of our money. I mean, we eat all the time in this society.

I should speak maybe for myself. Maybe you don't eat all the time, but we not only eat our meals, we eat snacks and we go out and get coffee a couple times a day and just something for my palate. Do I need the coffee? No, I don't need the coffee.

And therefore, the question is how much of my attention am I giving to this as opposed to how much I'm giving, say, in the same day to pursuing God deliberately. Now, there's a sense in which living the Christian life is a constant pursuit of God. I mean, just whether I'm faithful to my wife or I teach my children to do what's right or things like that.

I mean, those are things that I do as part of my pursuit of God. My whole life is a pursuit of God. But how much of my day do I spend pursuing God deliberately? Deliberately saying, I need to draw near to God.

I feel far from God. I need to get away and spend some time in prayer. I need to keep the radio off and just meditate on the Scripture as I drive through the valley here.

I mean, how much time do I spend? Probably not as much time as I spend thinking about and doing the eating thing. You know, Paul said in Philippians chapter 3 that there are some people whose God is their belly. I remember when I was a teenager, a preacher once brought that up and he challenged me.

He said, figure out how much time you spend every day thinking about preparing, eating, and cleaning up after food. How many hours a day does that account for? And then how many hours or minutes a day do you spend pursuing God, meditating on God, studying the Scriptures, praying? It's kind of convicting, don't you think? I mean, really, when you think about it, we do a lot of... I was convicted, and I don't look like a glutton probably. But as a matter of fact, you know, some people say, well, gluttony, that's the one sin that is most embarrassing because it shows on you.

You know, I mean, you could use pornography and no one might know because it doesn't show. But if you overeat, it shows. Not necessarily.

There are people who overeat and it doesn't show. I'm one of them. I undereat sometimes too, but I mean, it doesn't show whether I eat or not.

It doesn't show. And I could be a glutton and you wouldn't know it. And someone else you might think is a glutton might be less gluttonous than I am.

Their metabolism may make them hang on to every calorie they eat. And mine just all burn up. You can't tell by looking at someone if they're a glutton, but you can look at yourself and say, am I spending more of my time and energy in pursuit of food? Or put it this way.

The Bible says, whatsoever you do, whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God. How do I eat or drink to the glory of God? Well, it has to do partly with what I eat, because especially in what company I eat, and that's actually the context of Paul's statement that you don't eat meat, sacrifice to idols in front of people who are offended by that, because that stumbles them. That's not to the glory of God when you do that.

But obviously the amount you eat, the time you spend eating, I mean, eating is something you do every day. And you're supposed to do that to the glory of God. But sometimes God's interests in our lives are given second place to the eating.

That's the lust of the flesh too. And I think that's probably a bigger problem among Christians than sexual sin is, although there is sexual sin in the church. And when it is there, it is a big problem.

But I think the eating thing is probably a more widespread problem. I think there is idolatry there. In our society, in the psychological jargon of our time, many people are said to have addictions.

The things they're said to be addicted to are really just the lust of the flesh. Alcohol, drugs, people said they have food addictions. I've met people who were told by their counselor they have a sex addiction.

A sex addiction? What's a sex addiction? Does it mean you have to have sex or you go through withdrawal? I don't think there is that kind of addiction. I think what we're giving is sanitized language for things the Bible calls idolatry. A person who has a sex addiction is simply someone who idolizes sex.

He puts sex as the primary thing in his life, and he will not even control it to please God. Even though he knows it's the will of God for him to stop doing it, he still does it anyway. It's his idolatry.

Let's give it the right name. People who drink too much? The Bible never speaks of alcoholics, it just speaks of drunkards. People who drink too much.

There are people who become physically addicted to things like heroin. There are drugs that you can physically be addicted to. But even that, by allowing oneself to come to that point, they have made an idol of the substance, in that they have pursued it.

They've sought their comfort, their trust, their enjoyment, their attraction to that more than to God. You know, there's another kind of addiction we sometimes don't think about, and that is entertainment addiction. I think it's probably, if the truth were known, it probably is kind of a drug addiction.

It's probably an adrenaline addiction, you know? It's probably a chemical thing. But excitement, and this excitement can be in video games, it can be in exciting video movies, it can be a music addiction. There are some kids who feel like they can't stand to not have music playing all the time.

And adults too. It can be sports. Sports is entertainment.

And there are people who put that ahead of God. Now, I'm not saying any of those things are wrong in themselves, but I am saying that those quickly become addictions. You can quickly see when you are spending more of your time thinking about remembering the last video, looking forward to the next one, and looking into reviews, or talking to people about the latest movie, and see, wow, I want to get that one as soon as that one comes out.

Now, that entertainment is, you know, that's the idol of the idle. We are idle people. And because we are idle, we idolize entertainment.

You see, in more realistic times, people had to work more to survive. In fact, not only in more realistic times, but places, even now. In the third world, people don't just sit around idle saying, well, how are we going to spend the next few hours without getting bored? They have to work all day to eat, to support their families, and sometimes even working all day can't do it.

They still can't do it. They don't have time to think about, well, how are we going to entertain ourselves this evening? They get home and they eat and fall into bed or whatever they do because they have to get up early to do it the next time. And we are an idle people.

We've got a short work week. We've got high pay. I'm not, you might say, not in this valley we don't, but actually, the fact is, we make it.

We make it by. I mean, some people may have 60-hour work weeks here, but still, 60 hours is still a pretty small part of the week, believe it or not. I mean, the Israelites, God

assumed, God assumed that the Israelites would work six days a week and take only one off.

And even that, they would only be able to take off because God would miraculously provide for them. They'd otherwise have to work that day too. He didn't figure they'd have all savings they could live on and take two-day weekends.

And I'm not saying we shouldn't take two-day weekends. I'm simply saying that our culture is very different. And what we take for granted as normal is not what the world has usually considered normal.

We have a boredom factor that most people in history have never had to deal with. And we can either try to satisfy that boredom or undo that, escape it by entertainment and stimulation, or we can do it by getting excited about God, which is possible, by the way. Some of you have never done it, but God is, in His, what's it say about God? Is He boring? It says in Psalm 16, it says, in His presence is fullness of joy, and at His right hand are pleasures forevermore.

That sounds pretty good. That doesn't sound very boring to me. Fullness of joy, pleasures forevermore.

Yet very few Christians have found those there because they've never gone there for them. They have more tangible, more ready at hand forms of joy and pleasures and so forth. And this is idolatrous.

I think we really need to examine the way we spend our time and our money and our thoughts and the things that we value. What is the lust of the eyes? Well, the lust of the eyes is a Hebrew expression that means covetousness, means greed. And just as there are people who love pleasure more than they love God, and therefore that is idolatry, there are people who love money and possessions more than they love God, and that too is idolatry.

According to Colossians chapter 3 and verse 5, Paul said, therefore put to death your members which are on the earth, fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Also in Ephesians 5.5, he says, a covetous man, a covetous man who is an idolater. Twice Paul says in his writings, Ephesians 5.5 and Colossians 3.5, that a person who is covetous is idolatrous.

Well, what is covetousness? Covetousness is love of money. That's what the lust of the eyes refers to in Scripture. And it may not be money so much, although we do, we have a lot of money in our country and as such it's hard not to trust in money when you've got it.

I mean, when a person is poor they don't tend to trust in money, right? Because they can't, they don't have any money to trust. And that may be why Jesus said it's easier for

a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Because it's hard not to trust in money when you've got it.

And there's a sense in which you might say, well how can you not trust in money when you've got it? I know, I know exactly how hard it is. Because I've had to, I've had no money at times, I've had a lot of money at times. I've on a couple of occasions had windfalls usually from relatives or one case when my wife was killed I got an insurance settlement and I suddenly had a lot of money and I wasn't used to having money.

And I was used to living month by month and week by week just God providing for my current needs. And frankly living without the surplus was quite satisfying. I liked it.

I enjoyed it because I had to stay close to God. I always had to trust God. But when the money came, when I got an insurance settlement for example, I found that even though I determined I'd trust God the same without any change, I couldn't.

Because I didn't have to wonder how I was going to pay the phone bill. I didn't have to wonder what I'd do if my car broke down. At other times I always had to wonder that.

If I drive somewhere I'm trusting God, I'm praying every minute. Because I had an old car, if it broke down I had no money, it'd be at the side of the road, I'd be hitchhiking again, which I'd done a lot of times. And you know I just had to trust God.

But when I had money I thought, you know, I might want to trust God, but why? You know, car breaks down, write a check, get it fixed. You can hardly have money without putting some measure of trust in money. But if you do have money, realize that you're one of those that Jesus said is going to have a harder time being in the kingdom of God and therefore you need to make sure that it doesn't become an idol.

And it might not be the money itself, but the stuff that money buys. Houses, cars, toys, men's toys, tools, or in my case, books. Those can be an idolatrous thing.

I cannot bring myself to get rid of my books. I have books I've had for 15 years that I've never cracked except for my first bottom. Yeah, I like that one.

I may never read it, but I always think someday I want to read that book. And my friend Neil said, you know, what you need is a good match, a good fire. And he's right, you know.

And I know that my books are not an idol because I would be so relieved if they all burned up that I know God doesn't think I'm going to need to read those books. But see, right now it's hard to get rid of them. But ask yourself this, you know, if your possessions are not allowed, would you feel relieved if God came and took them all away? Some of you would because they're insured and you get money back for them.

My things aren't insured. And a friend of mine who's a preacher said, insurance is what you get when you want to make sure that if God takes everything away from you, you can get it all back. But ask yourself, if I couldn't get it all back and it all take away from me, would I be happy with just God? Would I be secure having only God? There are many millions of Christians the world over who've got nothing more than God to trust in.

And he's just fine. They do fine. Be careful not to let your heart trust in something else.

I need to quit this here, but there is the pride of life I wanted to mention briefly here. The pride of life is really just worship of self. Self is an idol to most people.

That's why Jesus said, if anyone comes after me, he has to deny himself. You have to put away the idol of self. And self as an idol manifests a lot of different ways.

Some of the most obvious ways that we recognize pride in ourselves or others is when someone has pride of appearance. They're good looking. Or they dress nice and they're real aware of it.

They put a lot of stock in their appearance. Or pride in their talents. People who become musical or artists or whatever, they get a lot of strokes for that.

They get a lot of attention for that and they're proud of themselves for that. Or a lot of people get proud of their reputation for spirituality. I almost said proud of their spirituality, but if they're proud of their spirituality, it's not really spirituality at all.

But people can have a reputation of spirituality without having any real spirituality and sometimes they're very proud of that. That's self-worship. People can be proud of their education.

I remember there was a fellow who used to have a Christian radio talk show. He had, I think, five or eight earned degrees and a very intellectual man. I may have told this before here, I don't know, but it's stuck in my mind as such a case of this.

He had a call-in show and I remember hearing on occasion someone call him and say, Mr. Smith, let's say. I could give his real name, but Mr. Smith, I'd like to ask you a question. He'd say, that's Dr. Smith.

He said it. He's a Christian on Christian stations. He wouldn't let them get past Mr. Smith.

That's Dr. Smith. He says, I worked a lot of years for those degrees and I have the right to be recognized. I think, change the station.

Jesus said, let no man call you teacher or father or master. You have one only that way. And when you hear a Christian getting proud of his education, it makes you want to gag.

It makes me want to gag. Of course, if you're proud of your education, maybe it doesn't

make you want to gag. You might think, yeah, well, I match up to him pretty good.

I guess that's sour grape for me. I don't have any education, but the fact is, if I did, I mean, when my book came out a few years ago, my publisher said, you know, this book, he said, you might be contacted by some colleges. They might want to give you like an honorary degree with this book as your thesis.

And I said, well, I don't know what I'll do if they try that because I won't accept it because I don't believe degrees mean anything. I know they don't because I've read books by PhDs and I know they don't know how to think in some cases. Now, I know some PhDs who are brilliant, but the fact that one guy has a PhD and he's brilliant and that guy doesn't even know how to think and they both have the same letters after him means the letters mean nothing to me.

I've known people who have no education. Some of them can't think and some of them can think better than PhDs. So, I mean, what's the big... I can't imagine why I wouldn't accept an honorary degree or any other kind of degree just because I don't despise people who have them.

It's just I don't see any value in them. But some people do and it's important not to place too much stock in that. That's the pride of life.

The last thing I want to say about the pride of life is that worship of self often is manifest in the attitude that I'm entitled to something. I'm entitled to something. And you might not say it in those words.

It might even sound crass to you to say it that way, but when someone rejects you and that offends you, doesn't that mean that you feel you're entitled to acceptance? You're entitled to be accepted? When someone doesn't say thank you to you when you've done a lot for them and you get upset, doesn't that mean you feel you're entitled to a little gratitude? A little appreciation? When someone doesn't respect you, if that bothers you, doesn't that mean you feel like you're entitled to some respect? How about comfort? You know, I'm entitled to have a more comfortable car than this. Advertising always says things like that. You deserve the best.

You owe it to yourself. It's not true. You don't owe it to yourself.

You know, one of the things that's really big here is that what I really like is, I like liberty. One of the reasons I moved to Idaho is because there's more what I perceive to be real liberty in Idaho than in Oregon where I came from. But it is possible to idolize liberty.

You know, I don't want anyone taking my guns from me. Well, what if they did? Would my security vanish? Would I be less secure without guns than I am with guns? To tell you the truth, no. I spent most of my life without any guns.

I was more secure then than I am now, probably. Idols do not provide real security. They're just looked to for a false kind of security.

I am opposed to gun confiscation. I oppose all gun laws, but, well, maybe not all gun laws, but certainly any that would impinge on the rights of the common man to own and bear arms. But that can be an idol.

And it is an idol to some people. Constitutionalism can be an idol. My constitutional liberties.

I'm entitled. I'm an American. Well, I wonder if any of the Christians in pagan Rome would have related very well with that sentiment.

They were slaves under a tyrant. For them to say, well, we're entitled to a little liberty. Well, I don't think they felt that way.

In fact, Paul wrote to slaves. What'd he say? He says, you slaves, if you're a slave, care nothing about it. If you can get your liberty, he says, use it.

But he says, it doesn't matter. If a man's a slave, he's the Lord's free man. If a man's free, he's the Lord's slave.

It doesn't make any difference. But, you know, there is a tendency to idolize liberty. That's part of the pride of life too.

I'm entitled. I have the rights. Now, Jesus said, which of you having a servant out plowing his field or tending his flock when he comes in from the field would say, oh, I just sit down here.

I'll serve you. No, you don't say that to your servant. You say you serve me.

And then afterwards I'll, you can have something to eat. And Jesus said, so also he says that servant does not expect to be thanked that he did what he was told. That's his role as a servant.

He says, so also you, after you've done all things that are commanded you say, we are unprofitable servants. We've done only what is our duty to do. Unprofitable servants kind of cuts into the pride of life and idolatry of self a great deal.

This is what Jesus said we should say. We're unprofitable servants. I deserve a little respect.

Excuse me, Mr. Servant, you deserve what? Well, I certainly have. They owe me a little appreciation. They owe you what, Mr. Servant? Mr. Slave? You are owed what? Well, we forget that we're slaves because we live in one of the freest countries ever.

Of course, we're losing a lot of that sadly. But frankly, I, in my own carnality, I want to see all of our freedoms retained too. Though I will have to say that having the freedoms we've had has been a danger to our souls because God gives us a lot of rope and we haven't learned how to stop tying nooses and putting them around our own necks spiritually.

We need to recognize that when God blesses a nation, he doesn't intend that they will turn their worship away from him who gave it to the blessings he's given. That's what Israel did repeatedly. And where are they today? They are scattered throughout the world without a relationship with God because they reject Jesus Christ because they did at one time turn to idols.

That can't happen to true church. The true church will never turn to idols. But those in the church, individuals in the church have been known to turn to idols.

Individual congregations can become idolatrous. Check out the Roman Catholic Church, for example. No offense to anyone here who may be Roman Catholic, but there's images in those churches and they are worshipped by many there.

I mean, it is clear that that which was once a church worshipping Jesus Christ can turn idolatrous just like Israel did. And so John warns the church not to go that way. Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

And this is a warning from an aged apostle to Christians who he sees as naive and in danger of falling into traps they might not otherwise recognize. And so all the things I've identified are just to get you thinking. There may be other idols present that I didn't mention, but maybe to get us thinking on those lines because God is greatly grieved and offended by idolatry in his people.

It's no less than if you found your wife or your husband to be committing adultery, you'd be greatly grieved. It'd be similar. Similar to the way God feels about us having other idols, other gods other than him in our lives.

So let's not put our trust in something else or value anything else or allow ourselves to be attracted to anything else more than to him or to his will for us. If you love the Lord, you'll love his will for you. And so his will may call you to separate from things that you value also.

But if you value him, the forsaking of that which he wants you to forsake will not be a difficult thing because you realize that he is worth more than all other things combined to those who have it. Father, we ask you that you would cause your word to sink into our hearts. Not my words necessarily.

Some of those might have been off a little bit to the right or to the left of where they ought to be, but your words certainly, Father, are never wrong and they speak to our

hearts like a sharp two-edged sword that divide between joints and marrow and soul and spirit and they are discerners of the thoughts and intents of our heart. We pray that your word might help us to discern the thoughts and intents of our own hearts so that we might make the adjustment necessary, that we might please you and be rid of the idolatry that so readily creeps into our lives and that we might not make excuses for the idols that are there, that we might see them for what they are and that we might have the courage and the manliness to take hold of them and thrust them far from us so that we may be the one who can save and the one who is faithful and the one who is to be trusted and valued above all and we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.