

“NO FAKE GODS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

November 22, 2009, 6:00PM

Heidelberg Catechism: Lord’s Day 34, Q94, 95.

Scripture Texts: Exodus 20:1-3; I John 5:21

Introduction:

Why is idolatry by far the single most frequently discussed problem in Scripture? Why does every prophet address it and confront it and spend so much time warning about it and preaching against it? Why does the Apostle John end his wonderful little letter of encouragement with this final word, “Beloved children, keep yourselves from idols”? (I John 5:21).

Is idolatry really that big a deal? Is it relevant today when none of us worship some foreign god and make little shrines to foreign gods? Is this just relevant for missionaries in certain cultures?

Hosea 8:4 With their silver and gold they made idols for their own destruction.

When a person or a society of persons turns away from God and toward idols, it is headed toward destruction. This is another way of saying all of our problems are religions problems. All of our problems have at their core the fundamental sin of idolatry. This is why idolatry is still a big deal, still relevant today.

To bring the problem closer to home, all of my problems and all of your problems are fundamentally religions, they are about the sin of idolatry. What do we love and what do we fear? What do we trust, what do we seek?

The most basic question the Scripture poses to the human heart is, “Has someone or something besides Jesus Christ taken primary place in your affections, loyalty, trust and desire?” Who or what controls your behavior, actions, or attitudes? Is the world, the flesh or the devil reigning on the throne of your heart? What sits at the apex of our pyramid of values and priorities?

The first, fundamental and foundational commandment.

Exodus 20:1 And God spoke all these words, saying,

2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. **3** “You shall have no other gods before me.

God does not waste any time arguing for His existence. God identifies Himself as a personal God, “I am the Lord *your* God.” He has a claim on the people for whom He acts, they are His people. As the God who rescues and delivers and conquers you need no other gods.

You shall have no other gods before me.

“You” is second person singular. This is addressed to you and to me individually, personally. This is addressed to anyone who has ears to hear, and hears what the Spirit of God is saying.

“Before me” means before my face or in my presence. And God is never absent. You shall have no other gods in addition to me or in opposition to me or in my face.

God is not just to be first, He is to be only. The commandments begin by making an exclusive, non-negotiable claim.

God calls us to a marriage of our hearts with His. This is why Scripture equates idolatry with adultery. God makes an absolute claim to an exclusive relationship. God calls us to forsake all others for Him alone. I must renounce all other gods, I must dismiss all of them, I must hate them compared to Him.

The only God fit to be our God is the God in whose image we are made, whose likeness we are.

That is a bold statement today. We are increasingly pressured by accusations of intolerance and hate speech to be open minded and tolerant and accepting of all claims of divinity by all religions. You can worship anyone you wanted as long as you didn't make an exclusive claim concerning your god.

But God said we shall have no gods before me and no gods side by side with me. I am Yahweh, your God, your personal deity. Have no other gods, no strange gods.

Five steps toward understanding idolatry today.

The *first* step toward understanding idolatry in Scripture is to understand that our problem with idols is fundamentally internal. The idols are idols of our hearts. The real problems in our world are not out there, they are in here. G.K. Chesterton hit the nail on the head when he was asked what's wrong with the world and he answered, “I am what's wrong with the world.”

The *second* step toward understanding the relevance and danger of idolatry is to understand that we are surrounded daily by powerful, tempting and intimidating forces crafted by our own hearts, by our neighbors and friends, by media, by politicians, by lusts and desires.

Our world is infested with idols, at least as many if not more than pagan cultures of old. We live in a polytheistic world, we always have. It's more so now than ever.

Israel was constantly being tempted to worship other gods, gods of the weather, the sun and the moon, gods of agriculture, animals, crops, fertility, local gods, regional gods, national gods. It

seems wise to make good with the gods of where you were living and the gods of your livelihood. We do the same thing.

The *third* step toward understanding the relevance and danger of idolatry is to understand that idols are often disguised as very subtle counterfeits that look like good things and even imitate characteristics of God.

The *fourth* step toward understanding the subtle danger of idolatry is knowing that idols always make false claims, false promises, create false hopes, offer false security and give false warnings. Satan's words to Eve in the garden are a clear example. But so is the lie whispered by alcohol, drugs, pornography, commercials, success, ambition, possessions, appearances, approval, etc.

Idols always lie, they always enslave and eventually always kill. Counterfeit gods always lead us to hell.

The *fifth* step toward understanding the subtle danger of idolatry is knowing human beings are created to be worshipping beings. Human beings are never not worshipping. We will worship someone or something. The question is not if but what. Someone or something will be master of our souls, we will bow and serve. We are innately religious and it is inevitable that we will be bound to some god.

There is no such thing as a truly secular society, they have a god, an idol, something that is supreme, of greatest value and importance. If we don't believe and worship the God who made us, we will believe and worship the god we make.

Idolatry is a problem deeply rooted in every human heart and deeply rooted in every human culture. There is always some object at hand inviting us to put our faith in it, and giving us good reasons for doing so.

The Pantheon of American Gods.

The ancient world fashioned gods with their hands, and built temples for them, or a pantheon for all gods. We fashion gods with our minds and hearts. For us our idols are *idols of the heart* (Ezekiel 14:3). Idolatry starts in our hearts, with our affections and desires.

Proverbs 4:23 Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

NASB 23 Watch over your heart with all diligence, For from it flow the springs of life.

NIV 23 Guard your heart ...

An idol is any immoderate or inordinate love, affection, desire, zeal for something/someone more than or over God. Idolatry is anything you love, desire, covet, enjoy and pursue or seek in order to gain control, comfort, approval or pleasure from other than God and Christ.

In simplest terms idolatry is when you substitute something created for the creator. Idols can be nature, environment, money, possessions, mankind, people, power, social and political systems, the welfare state, anything we worship, value, trust or desire more than God.

What do they look like today?

How can you keep yourself from idols or watch out for idols if you don't know what they look like? Would you know one if you saw one? Are there any idols in your heart?

Most of us have had our idols for so long we have become friends with them, we are comfortable with them, they aren't that bad, so what's the harm?

First, we make an idol of our self, we love and honor and esteem and care about ourselves above all others. We are self-seeking, we desire self-approval and applause. We consider ourselves wiser than God. We prefer our will over God's will. We make our stomach, our appetites, our lusts and our pleasures our god. Think how important food, sweets and coffee are to us.

Idols involve self-centeredness, putting ourselves first in some way, when we or our concerns or our priorities or pleasures are put at the center of our attention.

We serve them, seek them, make provisions for them. We give to them what is due to God.

Second, we make God's gifts and grace into idols. Idols can be bad things or good things or good gifts from God that are turned into a god, into something more desirable or satisfying than God (money, work, sex, marriage, toys).

Work, a good gift from God and commanded by God, can be an idol is put in place of God and other God-given priorities.

When any good thing, any created thing is made ultimate, or is made most important. Idols can be any created thing, and often are especially things that are gifts of God.

Third, some make people idols, spouse, children, grandchildren, relatives, friends, who you know. You love them more than God, and set your highest affections on them. You fear their loss. You depend on others more than God, look to them for approval.

Family, another good gift created and given by God, can be an idol if we are preoccupied with it and it is put above everything else.

Being well-liked, having the approval of others, can be an idol if it restricts us from acting or taking risks, if it puts us in bondage to what others say or think. What gives me value, worth?

Our appearance, our clothes, our homes, our yards, our gardens, a clean house or garage, our cars and trucks, our toys, our vacations, our bank accounts, our health, can all easily be idols.

What we buy and spend our money on says what is important to us, as does what we spend our time on. Where your treasure is, is indicative of where your heart is and what has your heart is your idol.

Social media, entertainment, any addiction.

Anything that becomes a right to us.

Anything that stirs up pride.

Fourth, for some fear is a god, something they fear more than trust God. Their fears are more powerful than God. Fear can be an idol.

Political idols, what we put our hope or trust in

Sports idols, golf, hobbies, things we collect or make

Security idols, what gives us security

Racial idols, who is better

Comfort idols, quality of life idols. Control, security.

Advertising speaks to idols, promotes idols, appeals to the idolatry of our hearts.

What about malls? Auto malls? Bass Pro shops and REI and Cabela's?

If your house was on fire what would you grab, what would you most want to save? What are you most fearful of losing?

We can make an idol out of the true God, by thinking about Him in any way contrary to who He really is. You have heard someone say, "I could never worship a God like that." So we form and fashion God after our own liking. Or we make an idol out of Him when we grumble and complain about His providence, when we judge Him to be unwise, unkind, not the way we want. We wish He was different.

Idols have a hidden power. We become like what we worship and when we worship idols we become like idols, deaf, dumb, blind, lame, impotent, stupid, unable to think or reason, crippled and handicapped in every way.

Romans 1:21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

If we worship the idol of the perfect body, we will become vain and self-focused as the models in the magazines.

If we worship the idol of money, we will become as greedy, selfish, and cut-throat.

If we worship athleticism, we will imitate athletes in their arrogance, their self-obsession.

If we worship the idol of power we will mimic the flip-flopping, anything-goes, popularity-obsessed politician (Tim Challies).

Application and Conclusion:

Are you willing to examine your heart to see if there be any idol set up there, are you willing to name it and call it what it really is? Are willing to de-throne it for the sake of your covenant relationship with God? Are you willing to ask God to show you any idols lurking within?

What can I do this week to de-throne some gods?

What can I do this week to en-throne God?

I John 2:15-16 Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17 The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.

I Thessalonians 1:9-10 For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, 10 and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Idolatry brings the wrath of a jealous God. Flee from idolatry to Jesus. Only through Jesus the supreme and perfect law keeper, can we keep this commandment. True from trusting anything else, and turn to Jesus to give you strength to fulfill God's law, to loving God and our neighbor.

I John 5:20 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. **21 *Little children, keep yourselves from idols.***

Prayer: Lord God Almighty, Holy Father, we are prone to wander and leave the God we love, we are susceptible to lies, deceptions, superstitions, temptations and profane things, grant us wisdom and obedience from the Holy Spirit to walk only in your ways according to your will and remain faithful to you alone. Keep our feet on the paths of righteousness for your names sake and your glory until we reach heavens shore through Jesus Christ, Amen.