

## **Idolatry: a modern-day problem**

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Idolatry was a generational problem for the nation of Israel. They would create various statues and graven images as objects of worship. When Israel became idolaters, God would punish them. Israel's identity was defined by Jehovah God. Their success as a nation was dependent on their relationship with Him. Therefore, the first commandment was an affirmation of God's existence and the second commandment was a prohibition against worshipping idols.

"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me. "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or 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 or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exod. 20:2-6).

The foundation of the law was the Creator's existence and rule. If the first command is not upheld and obeyed, none of the commandments matter. Therefore, Israel's choices were clear. They could be worshippers of God or worshippers of idols.

People typically consider idolatry a feature of ancient culture. While ancient idolatry continues to be practiced throughout the world, most people in our society do not relate to idolatry. However, idolatry is not just an ancient problem. Idolatry is a present problem that all people must confront.

In Psalm 135, a psalmist wrote a poem of adoration to the Creator. He praised God for His rescue of Israel. Near the end of the psalm, he included a warning against idolatry. We will use this psalm to consider the danger idolatry presents to our lives today.

### **Psalm 135:15-18**

(15) The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

(16) They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see;

(17) They have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths.

(18) Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them.

## The Present Danger of Idolatry

**1. Idols represent man-made attempts to fill the heart.** Our Creator made us with a desire. We all have a sense of emptiness in our hearts. We possess a longing for something greater than ourselves. This sense, desire, or longing comes from God. He has put eternity into our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Therefore, He alone can satisfy this human need.

Sadly, many people attempt to fill this desire with that which is not God. Like the psalmist described, we fashion idols with our hands. They are reflections of us. When we fill our hearts with worldliness, we have become idolaters. The apostle Paul wrote about “enemies of the cross.” He said their “god was their belly.” In other words, their desires became the gods they served. They sought to gratify these desires with earthly things (Phil. 3:18-19). But, what are the idols we worship today?

- Whatever in our life that matters most.
- The one thing or person that we cannot live without.
- The thing or person that we think will fix us.
- The thing or person that gives us our sense of identity.

**2. Idols cannot satisfy.** For most of us, family and career matter most. Fulfillment and identity are typically found through family and career. Jesus warned against loving family more than Him (Matt. 10:37). Family and career have a place in our lives; however, neither are a substitute for God. They are not designed to do what God alone can do for us. When we attempt to turn family and career into God, they will disappoint and hurt us. Consider two examples.

A little girl’s father abandons the family. When she grows up, she looks for the love of her father in relationships with other men. She looks for love, acceptance, and salvation in men. However, other men continue to disappoint, hurt, and leave her. What hope does she have to find fulfillment? Or, think about a man who seeks identity in his career. If he is promoted and successful, he becomes arrogant. He thinks that since he was good at one thing, he is good at all things. He has a delusional self-image. On the other hand, if he gets fired or his business fails, he is destroyed. He loses all sense of identity.

If we seek fulfillment in our idols, we will never be satisfied. In the end, our idols will eat us alive. The psalmist warned that idols do not have any breath in them. In other words, idols cannot give or sustain life. God can satisfy the desire He instilled in our hearts. James described God as the Father of lights. He is the giver of all good gifts, the greatest being the Word of Truth: Jesus (Jas. 1:15-17).

Jesus frequently spoke about His divine ability to satisfy our deepest longings. Jesus offered the water of life to an outcast woman. She had been broken by pursuing endless relationships with men. If she drank what He alone could give, she would never thirst. She would be satisfied (John 4). With this knowledge, she now could choose to continue in her idolatry or drink from Jesus. She chose Jesus.

**3. We become what we worship.** We do not typically see ourselves or others as idolaters. Idolatry is considered an ancient phenomenon, not a modern problem. However, if we thought about what matters most in our lives, we would find that we are what we worship. The psalmist warned that those who make idols become like them (Psa. 135:18).

Former American author and professor, David Foster Wallace delivered a noteworthy commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005. He warned about becoming what we worship. He said, "If you worship money and things-if they are where you tap real meaning in life-then you will never have enough. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you...Worship power-you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart-you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out."

What we choose to worship is deeply consequential. We become what we worship. Sadly, David Foster Wallace did not learn the lesson he conveyed. His idols, whatever they were, ate him alive. In 2008, he committed suicide. His end is a cautionary tale.

While Wallace may be an extreme example, this is the course of idolatry. Idolatry separates us from the Creator. Idols distort our thinking and debase our behaviors. They rob us of the value of life. They shape us for destruction (Rom. 1:32).

### **Conclusion**

Idolatry represents an ancient choice. God has permitted us to choose who and what to worship. Everyone worships someone, something. What we choose matters. The Bible shows us the blessing of worshipping the Creator and the futility of worshipping the creature. What do you worship?