

By Russ Gressett

Idolatry

Idolatry is something I think we gloss over as Christians. We tend to look at it as something some other foreign religion does or as some wooden or golden calf that we have to see as being "God". Not true at all. Idolatry really comes down to heart issues and to the order of things in our lives.

Ezekiel 14

1 Now some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat before me. 2 and the word of the Lord came to me, saying, 3 "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? 4 "Therefore speak to them, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord God: "Everyone of the house of Israel who sets up his idols in his heart, and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, and then comes to the prophet, I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, 5 that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols."

Idolatry is formed from those things that we allow to take a seat in front of God in our lives. By doing so, both we and God are robbed. We can see it in our agendas ... we can see it in what we focus on daily if we step back and take a look with some perspective. If the Father does not lead us into the things that occupy our time, then those things that occupy our time are set in front of Him. Have you ever gotten into something and over the long haul that something ended up pulling you away from God? Or, down the road, it was hard for you to see the hand of the Lord in it? Idolatry robs God of us and it robs us of God. It's a thief. It is rampant in America as it also was for the children of Israel.

The first commandment that God gave to the children of Israel was: "You shall have no other god before Me". Why? One, because He is a jealous God, as the bible declares, but He also loathes His children being robbed of blessings that would otherwise flow. Don't we have the same stance when it comes to our own children? We hate to see them not receiving what they could and should receive. We do not like seeing our own getting taken advantage of or robbed ... even if it is a result of their own decisions. Heck, I get perturbed when my child gets a bad call from the umpire ... robbed of that stolen base.

1 Corinthians 10

14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? 17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.

18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar? 19 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? 23 All things are lawful for me but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. 24 Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.

Paul makes a particular statement in the passage above where he is exhorting the Corinthians to “flee from idolatry”. The statement is almost hidden at the end ... but key. In verse 24 He says, *“Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well being.”* This exhortation right here is a “Christ-likeness” that will always battle idolatry straight-up. The statement is actually a picture of Jesus’ whole ministry ... it is literally what He did. He considered our well being ... and took action. Idolatry always has a catch, or a draw of “this is for me” that will seek to turn this statement of Paul’s around in our lives ... moving us to a place where we are doing just the opposite of what it says. It’s generally what our flesh wants (just as he said ... “Observe Israel after the flesh”) ... so don’t be fooled when in America we don’t have golden calves set up or wooden idols carved out and resting on the mantle. We tend to idolize ourselves, what we want, what will aid me, what will give me the edge, what will put me ahead, what will bring my crop in, cause my barns to overflow etc... We idolize those concepts from Wall Street all the way to organized churches and ministries.

In the “church”, what I would term religiosity, has run so rampant for so long that our belief system is all based on what we “do” (and mostly what we “do” inside the four walls). It’s not that “doing” is not appropriate, but it’s the belief system we have wrapped around the “doing” that actually gets placed in front of God and literally becomes an idol. Think about that for a minute. We have to name it, incorporate it, organize it, set up our ownership over it, protect it and control it. It can be hard to see if we don’t step back and really take a look. So much of the “doing” in organized churches and ministries is about “ecclesiastical turf protection”, or “our camp vs. their camp” stuff. To keep everybody coming here, we have to do-do-do so that the ones we have don’t decide to go somewhere else. The belief system behind it is a “If I do this ... then”, or “If I say this ... then” belief system. That sets us before God as an idol. We idolize ourselves. A true preference of others from the heart as Paul alludes to in v.24 above will never emerge out of that condition.

Matthew 19

16 Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" 17 "Why do you ask me about what is good?", Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to

enter life, obey the commandments." 18 "Which ones?" the man inquired. Jesus replied, "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, 19 honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself." 20 "All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

Take the rich young ruler parable above. This is a great example. We see a man that started out asking a question of "What must I do that I may have eternal life?" Jesus listed out some of the commandments and the rich young ruler replies, "I've done all that. What else?" Notice that Jesus had intentionally left out the first commandment (the anti-idolatry commandment) that we alluded to earlier ("You shall have no other god before Me"). Jesus knew that this was a particular problem with this young man. So instead, Jesus wrapped the first commandment up in the instruction that He gave him to "Sell what you have, give to the poor, and come follow Me". What did Jesus do here? He did what Ezekiel 14 said He would do. The man with an idolatry problem came seeking Him with a question and ... *"I the Lord will answer him who comes, according to the multitude of his idols, 5 that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols."*

The rich young ruler was obviously a man of wealth and Jesus touched his idol with this instruction. He touched what the man truly had in the first position in his life. The rich young ruler had accumulated the wealth ... he did it. Plus, that had a lot to do with how the typical Hebrew proved up their righteousness to others. If they had a lot of possessions and wealth, God had obviously blessed them ... so that should show everyone else that they were righteous. But if everything was sold and given away ... well, he decided "I am just not going to do that ... too much downside to my idol ... me." See what I mean? We idolize ourselves.

In the same vein, churches and church operations, ministries and ministry operations also can become idols. They take a position that is actually before God. Don't think this is not prevalent in the American church. It is. "Me and mine" and "corporate church" idols is what causes so much division in the Body of Christ. It's idolatry. Doesn't all the "our camp" and "their camp" mentality out there just sit wrong with you in your spirit? We segregate over petty doctrinal differences so the perceived ownership and control can be split up, hung on to and exploited. It's rooted in idolatry which is rooted in a preference of "me" versus a preference of "others". "I'm going to start something so I can make a name for myself ... so I can protect what I have done." We don't say those words out loud, but our actions say them loud enough. The same thing can be said about our businesses, jobs, even our own children. Many businesses are started for the same reasoning, same rationale, same motivations ... very close to what the rich young ruler manifested. It doesn't mean God will not lead us to start a business or a church. It just means we need to constantly examine and search our hearts ... and let Him search our hearts.

Psalm 127

1 Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.

A business owner's business can be their idol just like a church and its operations or a ministry and its operations can be an idol to its owner or leaders. Both are used to secure income which tends to end up placing those businesses at the top of our lives in terms of priority. However, our true trust and reliance needs to be placed in the Father. I know I have personally gone through seasons in my life where God allowed certain circumstances to produce a weaning in my life of particular dependencies ... idols if you will. A good father will find a way to get through to their child, if their child will let him. A person's business can end up being something that they have to protect at all costs because we see it as the field that meets our needs. The servicing of those needs, because of our viewpoint, is the stuff that idolatry is formed from. But what's the real truth about our needs?

Philipians 4

19 and my God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

How do we know we have an idolatry problem? Obviously, we start with asking the Father to reveal it to us. I have found that it's really a dependency issue. What do we depend on ... where is our true trust? Do we see the Father as our true source even when it comes from something that is apparently our own handy work? Let's ask ourselves the question, "Where are the concerns and worries and anxieties in my life coming from?" What is our "thought life" spent on the most? How much of everyday life do we filter through the word of God as it actually happens? A lot? Some? None? God does not want to be recognized and focused on just in the first 30 or 60 minutes of each day. He wants to walk the whole day out with us.

Let's all ask God to show us areas of idolatry in our lives. He will faithfully answer that prayer ... and if we are honest, we probably know some of the areas already.

Prayer

Father I see that idolatry is an issue of the heart and that it truly robs me of You and You of me. I repent of areas in my life where I have placed things and people and business and ministry before You. Help me Father walk the days of my life out in intimacy with You, always leaning on and trusting in You ... seeing what You are doing and getting involved where You are working. Amen.

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