



"The heart of man is a perpetual factory of idols."
—John Calvin

28-May-21

Identifying Our Idols

Idolatry. It is not a subject that we think about a great deal in this secular world. The word itself suffers abuse in the modern vernacular, referring not to the premier [sin](#) of the Ten Commandments, but to fly-by-night singing sensations and silver screen stars or starlets. Or, as Jerry Nason of the *Boston Globe* writes, it describes the cultural significance of the Super Bowl:

At stake for the simultaneously telecasting teams will be the major share of eyes and ears of an estimated 45 million addicts. The Sunday spectacular has been fed a steady and fatty diet of preposterous claims and Grecian idolatry by both networks almost to the point of digestive revolt. ("[Super Bowl I arrived with a splash in 1967](#)," January 17, 2021)

The man or woman on the street realizes that idolatry has religious connotations and knows that somewhere, in far-flung jungles or barely reachable mountain villages, people still worship idols and even offer animals to their gods. However, such instances are a long way from their sanitized, materialistic lives in the West. They would say we have grown—evolved—far beyond the need to worship statues or burn incense to imaginary deities.

Others, perhaps more keyed into worldwide religious practices, understand that religions like Christianity believe other religions like Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and many more, practice idolatry as a matter of course. These non-Christian faiths do not worship the [God](#) of the Bible, so they are, by definition, idolaters. Their adherents bow, pray, burn incense, ring bells, make offerings, fast, and make pilgrimages to worship and appease their gods.

Moreover, some Christian denominations fire accusations of idolatry at Catholic, Orthodox, and other Christian sects for their veneration of statues, icons, and other physical representations of God, [Christ](#), Mary, and various saints—not to mention crucifixes. Their accusations have merit, backed by the unchanging Word of God. Whereas the Bible, particularly the second of the Ten Commandments ([Exodus 20:4-6](#); [Deuteronomy 5:8-10](#)), specifically prohibits "any carved image, or any likeness of anything" from being worshipped, many professing Christian churches have reasoned that this direct utterance from God's mouth somehow does not apply to them.

However, the first of God's Ten Commandments, found in [Exodus 20:2-3](#) and [Deuteronomy 5:6-7](#), presents His overall definition and instruction regarding true worship and therefore idolatry, too, as its iniquitous counterpart:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me.

It is an amazingly simple and straightforward declaration. It is all-encompassing, allowing no ifs, ands, or buts, as the saying goes. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt is the only Being—or even thing, item, or object—that anyone should worship. If a person venerates anyone or anything else as a god, idolatry occurs. Considered negatively, God's pronouncement implies that no one or nothing else is even worthy of worship; the Most High God has no comparables in the entire universe!

Parsing His words in the first commandment provides us the insight that God knows that human beings will imagine and create other gods, which they will

worship. Not that He approves of the veneration of other gods at all, but He states it as given that people are inclined to worship and will worship just about anything that they suppose will give them what they desire. His statement not so gently disregards those futile human attempts to invent gods of their own making, placing Himself far above them, first over thousands of pitiful, impotent, wannabee godlings.

His sudden transition into the second commandment, forbidding the making of idols, tends to narrow the reader's perceptions of His intent in giving these laws. Their minds switch quickly to leering faces carved on totem poles or into soft stones or to brazen idols with outstretched arms awaiting its worshippers' sacrifices of their firstborn children. God's words certainly cover these blatantly demonic examples of idolatry, but He does not want us to believe that such examples are the *only* kinds of idols humans make. We are constantly creating idols to worship.

By God's definition in [Exodus 20:3](#), a false god or idol is anything or anyone we prioritize above Him. It need not be Baal, Odin, Zeus, Ahura Mazda, or any of the gods and goddesses of yore. We can easily put another person before God, paying him or her inordinate attention and giving him or her excessive adoration. Men have done this with their wives and vice versa, though this often occurs before the wedding and reality sets in. As noted above, people hold athletes, entertainers, politicians, and other luminaries of society in similar idolatrous regard.

We also make gods of our pursuits by spending far more time with them than with God. We can know if a pastime encroaches on idolatry when, not only would we rather involve ourselves in it than in God's Word or in prayer, but we also skip or even forsake our daily time with God to do it. If we live to watch the next episode of our current favorite television series, we have probably created an idol. If we spend every spare minute of our time thinking about or planning how to increase our wealth, we have likely raised an idol. Even doing normally good things—like researching health matters or getting exercise—can veer into idolatry if they take over our lives and supplant God from His primary place in them.

So, how do we identify our idols? It is not difficult to do—if we are honest with ourselves. Here is a partial list of steps we can take to help us find the idols in our lives:

First, we must determine *what we spend our time doing*. When we remove the time we spend sleeping, eating, commuting, and working—doing necessary things—how do we allot what remains? Do we spend large chunks of time engaged in one activity? Has that activity become all-consuming, supremely important, even addictive? It may well be an idol.

Second, we must determine *what we spend our money on*, particularly our disposable income. Do we funnel large sums into our hobbies, vacations, clothes, sports, entertainment, books, music, electronics, or similar distractions? Are we going into debt in our pursuit of these things? Our large expenditures on a particular pastime may point to an idol.

Third, we must determine *who we desire to please*. Are we trying to imitate a singer, movie star, or athlete we may never meet? Do we fixate on certain people, hang on their every word, and mimic their style? Do we crave fitting in with certain groups? Do we wilt under peer pressure? If we seek to impress others more than God, we have likely created an idol.

Finally, we must determine *who or what we fear*. Who do we avoid displeasing? Are we always kowtowing to or appeasing the boss, afraid to cross him even when doing so breaks the [Sabbath](#) or bends the law? Do we tiptoe around our significant other to the point of compromising God's way of life? Do we fear disappointing our children? If we fear anyone more than God, we have slipped into idolatry ([Joshua 24:14](#); [Psalm 96:4](#); [Proverbs 14:2](#)).

Because we do not bow to carved images, we tend to ignore the possibility of idolatry in our lives. But we need to do the hard thing and examine ourselves to identify any hidden idols. Once we find them—and cast them down in ruin—we can expect significant improvement in our relationship with God.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Keep Yourself From Idols](#)

by Martin G. Collins

We are continually barraged on the internet with advertisements, grabbing our attention and tempting us to covet. The apostle John in 1 John 5:21 warns us to be on guard against idols and idolatry, including false Christs, false doctrines, and self-centeredness. Physical aids such as paintings, icons, statues of Christ and the Virgin Mary, crucifixes, and rosaries, would fall into these categories. The attitudes we place on our own physical possessions also can become idolatrous. An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the space which should be occupied by God alone, anything having a controlling force in our lives, leading to religious infidelity. Ancient Israel was compared to a religious nymphomaniac, imitating the disgusting practices of the pagan fertility cults. Distorted or false concepts of the true God or worshipping a church also constitutes a manifestation of idolatry. People this year worship political candidates, promising vague concepts of change, while cleverly disguising or concealing varieties of Communism, Socialism, collectivism, Marxism, or Stalinism. Coveting a neighbor's spouse or his physical possessions constitute another form of idolatry. Probably the greatest idol of all is self, including the empirical self—my country, my church or religious traditions, my house, my team, my entertainment, my car, my spouse, or my children. Our forefather Abraham was able to resist these covetous impulses through his faith in God. The works of the flesh, described in Galatians 5:19-21, have their basis in idolatry. Only if we keep our mind on God instead of ourselves, remembering that we are God's people, purchased at the expense of Christ's blood, can we insure that we are not consumed by idolatry.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[The First Commandment](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

CGG Weekly: Identifying Our Idols (28-May-21)

Idolatry is probably the sin that the Bible most often warns us against. John Ritenbaugh explains the first commandment, showing that we worship the source of our values and standards. God, of course, wants our values and standards to come from Him and Him only, for there is no higher Source in all the universe!

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