

## Keep Yourself From Idols

### Idolatry

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Never in the written history of the world has there been so many things trying to grab our devotion, our interest, our wanting, and our coveting as we have today with all of the media advertisements and the Internet. I do not know if you are in the same situation that I am but I have anti-spam, anti-spyware, but it does not stop the advertisements from coming up on the screen when you are doing research and visiting certain sites. There are constantly things being thrown in your face, even our Bible programs—they are offering another book for you to buy on theology.

Advertising and selling has become such a fine art that this world knows exactly what button to press on each and every one of us, having to do with what our likes and dislikes are. Therefore, we find ourselves constantly being offered things to covet, and things to turn into idols. I know that you feel the same way that I do. It is getting tiring and it is getting wearying having these things thrown in our faces constantly. That is the way that Satan works, he wears us down.

"Little children, keep yourselves from idols." These are John's words of advice and warning to the people whom he fondly called 'little children'—whom he genuinely loved.

These are the words of an elderly man who was so concerned about the life and the future of these Christians to whom he was writing. The words of an old man are always worthy of respect and consideration. They are words that are based on a long lifetime of experience. More importantly, they are some of the last written words of an apostle of our God and Father, of our Savior Jesus Christ.

John is looking back across a long life, having had many different and unique experiences himself. He saw and heard the teachings and miracles of Jesus Christ. He was personally asked by Jesus to care for His natural mother.

He witnessed the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ, the growth of the church, the destruction of Jerusalem, the martyrdom of all the other apostles, the persecution of the saints, the infiltration of false teachers in the church, and the falling away of many. Some probably even went back to their former ways.

This elderly man knew his time was short, and as he sees this group of Christians in a hostile world, he wants them to live a life of spiritual success. He wants them to have a joy that is full, and so the last thing he writes in his letter is:

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

Now in ending on this note John is doing something that is very characteristic of him. He uses contrast. He enjoys comparing things: light and darkness, love and hate, that which is true and that which is false. He sees our spiritual battle as between two contrasts—two opposites. He ends the letter on that.

The previous verse told us:

**I John 5:20** And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.

Three times truth is mentioned there. It was very important to John, and this is what he is focusing on at the end of his life.

Then he adds, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols"—the false. This is a contrast between the true and false.

In other words, John enjoyed negatives; He did not see the positive as the complete story. So he generally puts his positive first and then his negative. This is what he does here. We are not only told that we must keep the

commandments and be perfect; we are also told that we must not sin. Here we see the negative in relation to the one and only true and living God—the avoidance of idols.

John always warns us! Moreover, because of his years of experience he knew how important warnings are. He warns the church to be wary of the world, of the antichrists, of the false teachers, and of false doctrines. He warns them to not to forget to put the things they learn into practice.

He warns them that it is useless to say you love God, but hate your brother. He warns them of putting on a pious act in worship, but not being true in the ordinary details of life during the week.

John has many warnings of that kind because he was a very practical minister, and he advised us how to apply God's truth in our lives on a daily basis. It is very dangerous to have only a theoretical interest in truth. In a sense, John did not write this letter merely to give a knowledge of the truth. His goal from the beginning was essentially practical—he wanted to help these people in their daily life, and in their battle against the forces that are set against them in this world. This is why he ends this letter with "Keep yourselves from idols."

John wants us to know the only true and living God—that we may know Him that is true, because of this contrast in life between truth and lies.

**John 17:3** And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.

John, throughout his writings, emphasizes this aspect of truth.

John says if we do not have that knowledge, if we have do not have that understanding, then we are not aware of the spiritual problems in which we are set. We are obviously going to be defeated. This knowledge of God is only available through Jesus Christ, who Himself is at God's right hand. If we know Him we have eternal life, as John repeatedly reminds us, and as I am reminding you today.

Knowing Him and knowing we have eternal life is the positive aspect of the truth. But if we want to make absolutely sure that we will be in that condition, we have to keep ourselves from idols. There are constantly things in this life and world that threaten to come between that knowledge of God and us.

In other words, whether we like it or not, it is a warfare; it is a fight of faith. There is an enemy against us and he is active and fierce. The primary goal of that evil one that John speaks of towards the end of the letter is to come between this knowledge and us.

The way he does that, of course, is to try to get us to fix our minds, our attention, and our hearts on something else. Therefore, John ends on this note to warn us against terrible danger.

In a sense, the greatest threat that confronts us in our spiritual life is the worshipping of idols. The greatest danger confronting us all is idolatry. Most people tend to think that above all we need to be warned not to do certain things, and there are many warnings like that in Scripture.

But never forget that before we are told what not to do, we are always told what we are to do—again, the positive versus the negative. Take the Ten Commandments for example—they are positive, then negative. They follow exactly the same pattern and procedure as John does here.

Idolatry stems from self-centeredness and rebelliousness. People refuse to surrender themselves to worship the true and living God as He commands. The world does not know how to worship God because they lack His Spirit. Without God's help, human nature tries to limit God to the confines of physical objects he understands.

People fabricate images or representations to aid them in worshipping a god they themselves have concocted. These images are called idols, icons, symbols or objects of devotion. Really, anything can become their idol.

The first commandment expresses that it is a sin to place a higher value on anything than what we place on God. Building on the foundation of the first

commandment, the second forbids the use of physical "aids" in worshipping the invisible God.

Such religious aids include: statues or paintings of "Jesus" or "Mary," nativity scenes, crucifixes, graphic symbols, steeples, stained-glass pictures of God or Christ, and many other things. We see more Celtic symbols coming out. Living in such a "visual" age, we should beware of such common idols in the society around us. However, breaking the second commandment is more than the use of physical objects and aids.

Our deeds and actions are always the outcome of our attitudes and our thoughts. 'As a man thinks, so he is.' If, therefore, we carefully scrutinize a person's life, it is not at all difficult to discover what he really believes and what is truly important to him.

God does not condemn every picture or image, but as the command states in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, "You shall not bow down to them nor serve them." It is the use of art or sculpture in worship that God condemns. I think people often overlook the "nor serve them" and put images on a higher level than God Himself. Many people make idols of their houses or cars. They serve them by spending every free waking moment on them. The principle is in the attitude and value placed on them.

Solomon had God's blessing to build a temple, where he erected golden forms of the two cherubim inside the Holy of Holies. On the walls of the sanctuary were carved figures of angels, trees, and flowers, none of which Israel worshipped. Of course, there was no image representation made of God Himself.

Actions are always the expression of a point of view, and that is why the actions always proclaim the man. So the thing to concentrate on is: the outlook, the philosophy, and the belief. That is emphasized everywhere in the Bible.

The fundamental error of the Pharisees was that they were so interested in the details of the hundreds of points of the law on which they were so expert that they constantly forgot the great principles of the law.

They showed that on one occasion when they went to Jesus and asked Him the question, 'Which is the first commandment of all?' They had been having a dispute among themselves with regard to this matter, just as people still like to argue whether one sin is greater than another. A person thinks, 'My sin isn't as bad as so-and-so's.' Nevertheless, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Here is Jesus' reply to the Pharisees:

**Mark 12:30-31** And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.

That is the principle, because if loving God comes first, then our actions, our conduct, and our behavior are likely to look after themselves. The Scriptures always start with this, and that is why the greatest danger in our spiritual life is always idolatry. Because not loving God and our fellow human beings (that is, our neighbors) stems from idolizing oneself.

What is idolatry? An idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone. Anything that holds my life and my devotion, anything that is central in my life, anything that seems vital, anything that is essential to me is an idol. An idol is anything by which I live and on which I depend rather than God. We see the self there, the 'we,' the 'me,' and the 'I.'

Anything that in an obsessive way moves, arouses, attracts, and stimulates me is an idol. An idol is anything that I worship, anything to which I give much of my time and attention, my energy, and my money. Anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol, when God is not the supreme figure.

Now when we look at it that way, we see how practical the apostle John's advice is in his first epistle. John was writing to people who had been pagan and who were still set in a pagan society, where idols had literally been made out of silver, gold, and wood, stone, and other material things.

They had not gone back to physical idols. They had been called out of that idolatry and they were keeping the letter of the law by not having literal idols. That was not the danger confronting these people.

The danger was the teaching of the antichrists and the dangers that have always confronted God's church wherever it is located. There was no suggestion in the New Testament that any of the saints were liable to go back to literal idolatry in that sense.

The apostle Paul earlier wrote to the Gentile Thessalonians acknowledging that the reason they turned from idols was to serve God.

**I Thessalonians 1:8-9** For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

This is the reason Paul gave for why they turned from those idols. They put the supreme Creator of the universe at the forefront of their minds as the main goal and object of devotion and worship.

God is called the "living" God here, to contrast idols, which are represented as dead, dumb, deaf, and blind.

The members of God's church the apostle Paul ministered to, and later that John was admonishing, faced the danger we do today. Everyone in God's church today knows that idolatry with carved and shaped material idols is a sin. What John and Paul were referring to, of course, were not primarily the objects made by man's hands. What they warned against were false ideas, obsessions, fanaticisms, and misdirected passions.

In the Old Testament, idolatry is seen as religious unfaithfulness. One of the most common biblical metaphors refers to idolatry as sexual impurity. This also has an origin in an idolatry that is built on many forms of sexual excess.

Just as sexual purity was all-important under the law and prophets, idolatry made the opposite claim. Fertility cults encouraged the flaunting of human sexuality as a way of ensuring the productiveness of the earth through magic.

For millennia, idols have represented nature gods, fertility gods and goddesses (as with the Baals and Asherahs). Idols have had long associations with fertility cults and their practices. Those practices were believed to be necessary to ensure successful grain and livestock production.

The demanded rites ritualized prostitution, both female and male, incestuous relations and the sharing of one woman by several generations of men. These things were associated with the idols by the Gentiles. Ancient Israel came to worship at their worst state. In addition, here we have in Washington, DC the Washington Monument, a major phallic symbol in the world. The stone idol or wooden pillar with its phallic symbolism seems to have been viewed as the mystical sire of resulting offspring, or even of the people themselves.

In this religious climate the prophets saw the image of an unfaithful wife as an obvious analogy for a nation abandoning its own God for that of another people. So the Israelites at their worst even got to the point of sacrificing their own children in the fire to Molech. Shameless and rebellious, Israel broke the marriage covenant, defiled herself with idols, and committed adultery with stone and wood. We are seeing the exact same thing happening in this nation today.

Jeremiah and Ezekiel even dared to characterize the nation of Judah as a religious nymphomaniac.

You can see why God is such a "jealous God" and refuses to share His praise with idols when we view idolatry from His perspective. It is downright disgusting, sleazy, perverted, debasing, and worse than the sexual activities of the beasts of the earth, as Ezekiel puts it.

God warns Israel through Ezekiel that idolatry will be punished. He shows here the central source of idolatry.

**Ezekiel 14:1-8** Now some of the elders of Israel came to me 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? 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, that I may seize the house of Israel by their heart, because they are all estranged from Me by their idols.' Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: Repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations. For anyone of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell in Israel, who separates himself from Me and sets up his idols in his heart and puts before him what causes him to stumble into iniquity, then comes to a prophet to inquire of him concerning Me, I the LORD will answer him by Myself. I will set My face against that man and make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of My people. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.'

God is going to handle this Himself, and He is going to bring this nation down because of idolatry and Sabbath-breaking, as He did ancient Israel.

The central source of idolatry is in the heart and mind. That is where it is determined. The idolatry being spoken of here includes having false ideas of God. Idolatry is worshipping our own idea of God and not the true and living God. That is an abomination!

The Muslims do not worship the one true God. They worship a god that was created, made-up by an Arab warrior. Allah was created by man to further his own self-centered violent objectives. Truth is of no value to them; therefore, that religion is a lie.

The Buddhists, the Shintoists, Taoists, and the Confucianists do not worship the one true God because they reject Jesus Christ—who is the only path to God. Truth is of no value to them, therefore, these religions are lies.

The Hindus are so confused that they worship multiple gods and goddesses. They have a hard time even naming them all. Truth is of no value; therefore, it is a lie.

Judaism does not know God since they also reject the only way to the Father through Jesus Christ. Truth is of no value, and is distorted into a lie.

So we see why the apostle John emphasized truth in the verse right before he turned and said, "Little children, keep yourself from idols." The apostle John was very concerned about idolatry. The antichrists had been denying the teaching that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. They had been denying that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God.

John's reply to this is, 'If you claim that, and if your idea of God is not the true idea based on Scripture, if you have a false conception of Him and are worshipping false ideas and beliefs, according to Scripture that is simply idolatry'.

Idolatry can take many other forms.

It is possible for us to worship our religion instead of worshipping God. The manifestation of idolatry is very subtle. We may think that we may be worshipping God, but really we may be worshipping our own religious observances and devotions. I use the word "we" very loosely here. I do not believe that anybody in here is guilty of that type of thing but I do not know the hearts, only God does.

It is possible for us to worship not only religion but also our own church, our own leader, or our own point of view. Theology has often become an idol to people. They have really been worshipping ideas and not worshipping God. It is amazing that people leave us and go somewhere else, usually over one point of doctrine or one point of prophecy because they have a pet doctrine that they have put as all-important.

An idol may indeed be a literal idol, but it does not stop at that. We can make an idol of another individual or group. Dictionaries define an idol as "any object of ardent or excessive devotion or admiration." Even the secular

definitions recognize this thought- mind- and heart-based source of idolatry. Obeying the dictates of a person, church, or some other group contrary to the direct commands of God is idolatry. The individual or group becomes the idol, superseding and replacing God Himself.

We saw this in a big way with the disintegration of the Worldwide Church of God. Many members did not really believe the truth. They were giving Herbert W. Armstrong lip service for years, some for decades. However, when he was gone they lived their lives openly in the way that seemed right to them. Their idols took over, fueled by self-centeredness. They worshipped the god of their own image—of their own devising. So we saw many of them go from Sabbath keeping to Sunday keeping—in some cases after decades of keeping the true Sabbath.

Some people get so enthralled with ideas that they forget God first loved us. People seem to stop at the ideas and the theories, and neglect the practice and imitation of His way of life. Again, anything that occupies this central position rather than God Himself is idolatry.

We can clearly see that as human beings we are totally incapable of righteousness on our own. We must have the mind of God, and we must have His Holy Spirit to empower us to be able to begin to live without idolatry.

There are people who worship their own experiences. They do not talk about God; they talk about themselves and what has happened to them—always self in the foreground rather than God. We see the humanists doing this in a big way.

There are people whose idol is their own country. They go beyond patriotism to fanaticism. There are people who worship certain people in the country. The presidential election process brings this out into the open. There is a kind of mysticism that has often been developed for certain leaders. A politician runs for office promising "change." We hear that a lot lately, and purposely never define what they mean by change. We have no idea what they mean by change, and change gives us hope. Change to what? People do not care because they are mystified by the leader and by his oratory presence.

This is going to be a global issue when the false prophet appears on the scene.

**Revelation 19:20** Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image.

Idolatry!

Even with what the world saw in the twentieth century in the dictatorships of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao Tse-Tung, there are still people who worship the state—the power of the state and what the state can do for them. They live for the state—it is their idol, it is their god, because that is what they rely on for everything. Socialism, Communism, Communitarianism—that is the "change" that the present presidential candidates are intending.

We have to be aware of and more careful about our self-examination. Our idol may very well be another person. A man may make an idol of his wife; a woman may make an idol of her husband. Parents may really worship their children; the children may occupy in their minds and hearts the place that should be occupied by God. They give more time, attention, and more thought to them. Parents are more concerned about children. Everything else, even attendance at church, may be neglected because of the children.

I have turned into an idol any person that occupies the place God should occupy in my life. I have allowed that person to become an idol to me. That is what happens with performers on the appropriately named "American Idol" television show. That show puts ready-made idols out into the foreground of the youth's minds. I remember seeing a commercial for "American Idol" and they had a young girl, I think she must have only been 12 years old. She was just sobbing because her favorite American idol was on stage and she was just about passing out. He was indeed her idol.

Many people worship their work, their profession. Sometimes we hear someone say to a retired person, "What did you used to be?" or "What did you used to do?" As if a person's life has no value after a career. Women put careers before their children and certainly before God. In this society, people live for careers; they sacrifice all for their career.

God is pushed to one side, or totally rejected, so that they can continue in their profession and their status. They want 'the position'! They want this 'great' thing above all else. They want this thing so badly it is what they live for. Anything that occupies the place of God is idolatry.

In a very real sense, there is no difference between that and making a god out of gold, silver, wood, or stone. They did it with the hands. We do it with the Spirit.

Covetousness is idolatry. Covetousness is a strong desire for, and a seeking after, material things that become objects of our worship if we hold them as more important than God. Someone else's house or car can be an idol if we covet them. This attitude is identified with idolatry because it replaces God with self-interest and visual things.

Any earthly desires, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, and greed, have an association with idolatry.

**Colossians 3:5-6** Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience,

The wrath of God is coming upon those who are guilty of covetousness, which is idolatry.

The covetous person makes his money his god, but it is God's prerogative how He gives happiness and wealth.

Every righteous person seeks his happiness in God. The covetous person seeks happiness in his money, which only God can give; therefore his covetousness is actually idolatry. It may not be that his idol is of gold and silver, but it is his idolatrous attitude that gives rise to the action.

Since an idol is an object of adoration, one who is covetous becomes an idolater.

**Ephesians 5:5-6** For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Some of the strongest language in the Bible is used for idolatry: abhor, detest, provoke, rebellion, stubbornness, disobedience, abomination. The prophets characterize idolatry as a pigheaded, willful disobedience of God's law and even of natural laws. Remember that the ancient pagans used to commit all types of sexual perversions to worship their idols, where even the natural laws are willfully disobeyed.

It is the kind of disobedience that would not even be committed by dumb animals, implying that idol-worshipping humans are cruder than animals. Sometimes people give in to syncretistic thinking and to the seductive power of idolatry. To God, idolatry is a sin and an abomination.

Because idols are not really gods, only the deceived worship them; and when they do, they worship Satan, the deceiver. False gods make people false.

Probably the greatest idol of all is self. In reality, we can trace all of the others back to self. For example, those who worship *their* country do so because it is their country. They do not worship another country, and that is for only one reason: they happen to have been born in this one rather than that one. I am not saying that patriotism is wrong, only that our spiritual citizenship is in heaven, and that is what we are talking about today.

It is really about themselves, and the same is true with children; it is because they are *your* children. It is the relationship in which that one person is something to *you*—it is always self. Do not get me wrong—loving our children is right and we should be doing it to the best that we can and asking God to do just that, but idolizing them is wrong. In addition, we see in this society, thanks for the perverse training that parents have been given through Dr. Spock, of the 60s, 70s, and 80s. He basically rejects what he said in the 60s and he is such a confused man. Others say that 'time outs' are best for children rather than real correction. Therefore, we see a society that just idolize their children through mishandling and a lack of true love.

Not so with God—"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.' Even God Himself was willing to sacrifice His own Son out of love.

Not so in the way of idolatry with Abraham either:

**Genesis 22:1-12** Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

Abraham's only son was not an idol to him. Thankfully God does not test us in that way, and require us to offer up our children in that way. But from the other angle or side, how often do we put our children in the place of even coming to worship God? I have heard of people, in other church groups, in the past who have foregone going to services so they could take the children to the beach. Or they have not gone to services because their child had a football game or something like that. We have to really think hard when we do not come to services on whether we are just letting our children come before God. We should love our children even to the point that we are willing to give our lives for them, but not to idolize them.

It was not about what Abraham or Isaac wanted. Abraham's only son was not an idol to him. Abraham did not serve self.

All the saints throughout the centuries have recognized that self is at the center of the problem of idolatry. The ultimate idol about which we have to be so careful is this horrible self—this concern about myself, putting myself where God should be. Everything revolves around *my* self, *my* interest, *my* position, *my* development, and all the things that result from that.

It is all quite shameful and foolish; God will not tolerate it for long. He wanted to destroy the Israelites for their idolatry. So this nation that we live in, and all of the nations that are the descendants of the children of Israel, should take close heed to this that God does not tolerate idolatry for long.

**Exodus 32:2, 4, 6** And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." . . . And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" . . . Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

We see some things there that are often associated with idolatry, eating and drinking, both pleasurable, and rising up to play, another pleasurable thing.

So this brings to mind our entertainment, because entertainment is pleasurable, sports activities are pleasurable, and they can be put before God. This is something that we have to be very careful of.

**Exodus 32:7-8, 10** And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'. . . . And the LORD said to Moses, "Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation."

God knew before any of us could possibly have realized that the only way to clean the nation up was to get rid of those idolatrous individuals. Therefore, my question is, "Is that what God is going to do in our nation?" Is He actually going to get rid of those idolatrous people in the tribulation and the Day of the Lord? I wonder how much of this nation will turn before that time? Probably very few.

The Israelites' lack of faith while Moses was on Mt. Sinai made them feel insecure. Moses was gone 40 days when the Israelites fashioned a calf of molded gold to substitute for the invisible Creator God. How shameful and foolish!

In their own minds, they had reduced God to something that they could control and call upon when convenient. Those who repented were ashamed at what they had done. So thankfully some Israelites do actually repent.

**Isaiah 44:9-11** Those who make an image, all of them are useless, and their precious things shall not profit; they are their own witnesses; they neither see nor know, that they may be ashamed. Who would form a god or mold an image that profits him nothing? Surely all his companions would be ashamed; and the workmen, they are mere men. Let them all be gathered together, let them

stand up; yet they shall fear, they shall be ashamed together. The blacksmith with the tongs works one in the coals, fashions it with hammers, and works it with the strength of his arms.

This is depicting a great deal of effort in making this thing that does not hear or see.

**Isaiah 44:12** Even so, he is hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint.

The human creators of idols themselves are susceptible to hunger, weakness, and fainting, so how can they in their temporary flawed life create something worthy of worship?

It brings to mind the manufacturing of automobiles today, which so many people fanatically love and care for, when in reality, they have no power in and of themselves. It is foolishness and absurd.

This reminds me of what Paul wrote:

**Romans 1:22-23** Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

The same holds true for software games that hold people's attention for hours, then days, then weeks. Why? Because they provide thrills and enjoyment. Again, the self is served. The same holds true for television.

Ultimately, any violation of God's law is idolatry, and idols may serve as an image and label for all that is anti-Christian.

A manmade image can never represent the Eternal Sovereign God. When Isaiah attempted to give comfort to God's people, he pointed out the greatness of God's might and the strength of His power compared with humanly manufactured molded and carved things.

**Isaiah 40:12-15, 17-26, 28** Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, measured heaven with a span and calculated the dust of the earth in a measure? Weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales; look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing. . . . Nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him? The workman molds an image, the goldsmith overspreads it with gold, And the silversmith casts silver chains. Whoever is too impoverished for such a contribution chooses a tree that will not rot; he seeks for himself a skillful workman to prepare a carved image that will not totter. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is He who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, which stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them out like a tent to dwell in. He brings the princes to nothing; He makes the judges of the earth useless. Scarcely shall they be planted, scarcely shall they be sown, scarcely shall their stock take root in the earth, when He will also blow on them, and they will wither, and the whirlwind will take them away like stubble. "To whom then will you liken Me, Or to whom shall I be equal?" says the Holy One. Lift up your eyes on high, and see who has created these things, who brings out their host by number; He calls them all by name, by the greatness of His might and the strength of His power; not one is missing. Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable.

Later, in Isaiah 46, Isaiah mockingly commiserates with the poor weary beasts forced to transport the worthless cargo of idols as they traveled to and

from ceremonies, because it is such a vain effort. So when we see a description of God like that, who is like God? It shows the foolishness and the shamefulness of having idols of any sort.

Worshipping idols is irrational since placing a higher value on some material thing defies all wisdom. Often the world looks at material objects superstitiously (e.g., charms, religious crosses and symbols, rosary beads, a lucky coin, or a four leaf clover). People look at them as appealing and silly at first, but then they come to rely on them. People would stroke a rabbit's foot, not as much now but certainly a couple of decades ago.

To combat such foolishness Isaiah sets forth the majesty and glory of God, and in verse 25, he asks rhetorically—what could be an adequate and appropriate and accurate representation of such a God? And if God is such an awesome Being—how great was the folly of idolatry, and how vain was all their confidence in the gods which their own hands had made?

Idolatry is condemned as a work of the flesh for which there is a horrible fate. Every last one of the sins in the list of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21 has some form of idolatry as its motivator.

The works of the flesh in Galatians 5:20, include the specific act of idolatry as well as other specifics. In verse 21, Paul was inspired to write concerning those who practice the works of the flesh—"Of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

That is an absolute statement inspired by God through Paul.

These human traits begin with rebellion against God. Idolaters will not inherit the Kingdom of God.

Samuel rebuked King Saul with these pointed words:

**I Samuel 15:23** For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He also has rejected you from being king.

Here stubbornness is equated to idolatry and sin. We are all somewhat stubborn. We should be steadfast in the truth, not stubborn in self.

Idolatry has an impact on later generations. Deuteronomy 5:9 commands, "you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,"

God says those who commit idolatry hate Him. Very strong language! Remember, there are both the letter of the law and the spirit of the law having to do with the breaking of the second commandment. The letter deals with the action and the spirit deals with the attitude.

Children learn by example, and if their parents set the example that physical objects have excessive importance, then their children will absorb and pass down the same values. Idolatry is very serious—to say the least. Keep yourself from idols!

We have to beware that we do not put ourselves in place of God. The greatest danger in the spiritual life is idolatry and it affects all our activities. Keeping ourselves from idols really means that we must guard ourselves as if we were in a defense force against idolatry. This is something that *we have to do*; it is not done for us. God does not do our resisting for us. He helps us by giving us the power of His Holy Spirit to resist, but we do the resisting. The apostle Paul tells us:

**Philippians 2:12-13** Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

Therefore, we are always to be on guard, and we watch and pray. We realize that there is this terrible danger and we work to do something about it.

It is the same thing that we find Isaiah saying in the Old Testament.

**Isaiah 26:3** You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

God will do this for us only if our "mind is stayed" on Him. The word translated 'mind' is derived from a root word that means: to form, to create, to devise; and it represents something that is formed or made; as well as, anything that is formed by the mind—its thoughts, plans, strategies. In this context, it indicates the thoughts themselves, or the mind that forms the thoughts. So here we see that the mind can be formed to worship idols or it can be formed to worship God.

The mind is capable of thought and will, so here it represents the whole attitude and habit of a person. The mind forms the idol. God will support us if we are working to keep ourselves from idols. We have to keep ourselves in the right relationship to Him. We have to be careful too that some idol is not receiving our time and energy that should be given to God. We must constantly be watchful.

Realizing that we have to beware of an enemy that walks the earth seeking whom he may devour and throwing evil darts against our spiritual armor—against our shield of faith. We have to guard our minds and understanding.

So, how are we to do this? How are we supposed to guard ourselves from idols?

The principles involved are quite simple. We have to remember that we are God's people, and that we are those whom Christ purchased at the price and cost of His own precious blood. We have to remember our purpose and potential, and the kind of life we are walking in.

If we are of God, and belong to God, then we have to live for God; and we cannot live for those other things. It does not matter what they are, we must not live for them. We can use them, but not abuse them.

God has given us these gifts; but if we turn any of them into our god, we are abusing them, and we are worshipping the creature rather than the Creator.

The way to avoid that is to realize and remember what we are. We are to remember that we are not of this world, our citizenship is in heaven. Therefore we must not live for, or worship anything that belongs to it.

In addition, we have to remember the true nature of idols. That is the way to avoid worshipping them and a very good way of guarding yourself against idolatry. Just look and consider what they are, and there again it is something that we need to be reminded constantly.

Look at the things we tend to give our attention and our respect. Even if we put them at their highest and their best, are they worthy of it? Is there anything in this world of time that is worthy of our worship and our devotion? We know full well there is not!

There is nothing in this world that lasts. Everything is only temporary, everything is moving on to an end. There is nothing material that is lasting and eternal. Therefore they are unworthy of our worship. Worship is extravagant respect or admiration for, or devotion to an object of esteem. People worshipped the dollar, but increasingly it is other currencies and forms of wealth.

They are all gifts given to us by God, so let us use them that way. Let us not regard them as worthy of our devotion. It is absurd that humans worship money, possession, position, success, any person, children, or anything else of this temporary, physical life and world. It is all passing away. There is One alone who is worthy, and that is God!

The way to keep ourselves from idols is to remember the opportunity and potential God has given us by His grace and truth, and to grow in a personal relationship with Him.

Remember the privilege that is offered to us is: to worship Him in sincerity and truth, to walk with Him in His way of life, to know Him through obedience and experience and to fellowship with Him and His Son Jesus Christ.

There are times when we are tempted in ways that lead to idolatry. These are times for pause and reinforcement.

**I Corinthians 10:12-14** Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you

to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

So here we see an association between temptation and idolatry, and God is the one that brings us away and helps us to resist idolatry.

To fight these tendencies, we have to reflect on the sure promises we have been given. When we realize and understand the amazing blessing of knowing God, then everything else pales into insignificance.

God wants us to worship Him directly rather than through an idol. He wants us to worship Him humbly, and in sincerity and truth. Idol worship is degrading to the worshipper and an abomination to God. But when God calls us into His own spiritual presence, He wants us to worship Him directly.

In the sample prayer we are advised that when we pray, we should begin with something similar to—"Our Father who is in heaven. . ." This is a direct acknowledgment of Him.

Yes, we have our Advocate, our Mediator, but we pray to God directly as Jesus did. We worship God directly as Jesus did.

God looks to those who worship Him in humility and respectful fear and sincerity and truth.

Before God calls us to His way of life, we are completely immersed in idolatry. Then conversion begins the long process of coming out of idolatry. At first, we leap out of the world and any association we may have had with literal material carved or molded images. But the thoughts and mental idols of the heart take much longer to overcome.

So in this light, the apostle John warns, "little children, keep yourselves from idols."