

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT FREEDOM OF WORSHIP - Exodus 20:4-6 - "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. [5] 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, [6] but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

In the last letter of the New Testament to be written, we find an old, experienced Apostle John saying these words: 1 John 5:21 - "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." Now, whatever else these words mean, of this much we are certain. The danger of turning to idols didn't die with the Old Testament. It was an ongoing threat to the New Testament church.

1) **THERE'S A DOCTRINAL CONTENT TO PURE WORSHIP THAT GOD REFUSES TO SEE IGNORED BY THOSE WHO MAKE APPROACH TO HIM**

To me, this is at the heart of the second command. By nature, it's a command given to **religious** people. It's not given to atheists. This is a command given to people who **do** worship. The **first command** tells me that God is God and I must serve Him alone. The **second command** tells me that God **cares about how He is approached**. It tells me that I cannot choose my own method for encountering Him. It tells me that my worship can't be offered on **my own terms**.

Our society has long learned that there is a greater chance at turning people from the Christian faith with **a blending of gods** than with a **denial of Jehovah God**. That's because people in our society are **fundamentally lazy** in the way they worship. Our world knows that while people are just proud and committed enough to their Christian heritage that they won't stand for a denial of God, they are also intellectually lazy enough and fearful enough of public rejection to blend their beliefs with others, so long as they aren't perceived as turning from the faith they were raised in.

2) **IN MOST CASES, THE TIMES WHERE GOD JUDGED HIS PEOPLE FOR IDOLATRY WERE NOT TIMES OF ANY INTENTIONAL TURNING FROM GOD**

GOD - Let me give you just a couple of examples. Take a look at what may be the best known story of idolatry among God's people: Exodus 32:1-5 - "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, "Up, make us gods who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." [2] So Aaron said to them, "Take off the rings of gold that are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." [3] So all the people took off the rings of gold that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. [4] And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" [5] When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord."

a) **The people were directing their thoughts to the true God of Israel.** Even as thy danced, they were remembering the **God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt** - Exodus 32:4b - "...And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

Now, these people weren't stupid. They know they weren't brought out of Egypt by this gold calf. They had just **made** this calf. They were thinking about God's delivering power over them from the hand of the Egyptians. But their beliefs were already being influenced by the polytheistic religions of the people around them.

b) **The people celebrated this worship with a special feast directed to the Lord** - Exodus 32:5 - "When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord." But where did they ever get the idea of building a gold calf, of all things? And there is only one answer to that question. They got that idea from the worship of Baal. And the use of gold statues - usually a bull or a calf - was the common expression of Baal worship. "Well, were the people **thinking** about worshiping Baal?" I don't know. Perhaps not. But this case is such a clear reminder that God will allow no **mixing, no blending of false ideas into the true worship of Himself**.

Look with me at another case: 1 Kings 12:25-30 - "Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel. [26] And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David. [27] If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah." [28] So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt." [29] And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. [30] Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one."

King Jeroboam now faces a huge problem. The people are commanded to offer sacrifices only in **Jerusalem**. Jeroboam is king over **Israel**. He is based in **Samaria**. He doesn't want his people going up to worship at Jerusalem because Jerusalem is in Judah under King Rehoboam. If the people go up to Jerusalem, Jeroboam fears they will never come back.

Once again, don't miss the important point in this story. **Jeroboam isn't trying to take the people away from worshiping God. He simply wants them worshiping God at home in Israel rather than up in Jerusalem.** But all the while, he reminds the people that they are worshiping **the God who brought them out of Egypt** - with a slight addition: 1 Kings 12:28 - "So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

Now, Jeroboam knows better than to say "**gods**" in the plural. What makes him say this? Think about it. He has set up these idols at Bethel and Dan. Two places. Two idols. Sure, the idols are only supposed to **represent** God. But the idols are what the people see. And they see more than one. And gradually, what was probably once designed to only **represent** God, comes to be **identified with** God.

3) **WHY HAS IDOLATRY ALWAYS BEEN SUCH A PROBLEM FOR MANKIND?** - This is an important issue. Because the answer to that question also shows the exact **nature** of the sin of idolatry. We need the Bible's own witness to reveal the wickedness and emptiness of idolatry: Isaiah 44:12-17 - "The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. [13] The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. [14] He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. [15] Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. [16] Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" [17] And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"

You just can't miss the thrust of those words. There's no way any person can miss the stupidity of what he's doing as he fashions his idol. He himself cuts the tree down.

Isaiah 46:5-7 - “To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me, that we may be alike? [6] Those who lavish gold from the purse, and weigh out silver in the scales, hire a goldsmith, and he makes it into a god; then they fall down and worship! [7] They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place. If one cries to it, it does not answer or save him from his trouble.” This passage gives the height of irony regarding idol worship. Here are people who are praying to their idols for deliverance. But the enemy still attacks. Not only do the idols not ***deliver*** them, but when the enemy comes, the people have to ***carry the idols away from danger!***

4) **IDOLATRY IS THE ULTIMATE FORM OF MAN'S ONGOING WORSHIP AND ENTHRONING OF HIMSELF**

Romans 1:18-25 - “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. [24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”

They worshiped and served the ***creature*** rather than the ***creator***. That's the whole thing right there. Since the fall, man uses religion to his own advantage - ***not to find God, but to avoid God.*** But he stays religious to save face. Look at those two shocking verbs. ***“Worship”*** and ***“serve”*** the creature. Worship the self. Serve the self. Dethrone the Creator who made us. ***That's*** what's wrong with idolatry.

Now some other verses of Scripture start to make more sense. This is why Paul says that, at its root, idolatry springs from ***coveteousness***: **Colossians 3:5** - “Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and ***covetousness, which is idolatry.***” The reason Paul says ***covetousness amounts to idolatry*** is simply that both covetousness and idolatry are expressions of the same heart. Covetousness shows by love for self - for gain - for the desires of my own heart. My goods become my idol, though I would never bow before a bank vault.

So this command, while ***first*** applying to the use of idols in religious worship, also speaks of the ***idols we keep enthroned in our hearts.*** The desire for self-rule is the root of all idolatry.

5) **IDOLATRY IN THE CHURCH TODAY** - **1 John 5:20-21** - “And 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.**” What wonderful truth is bound up in these words! First, there is the truth of eternal life given through Jesus Christ. Then comes the warning against idols. I take that to mean that to continue to walk in Christ I must keep my life from all idols.