

21st Century Idols

Acts 17: 16-34

Not going to exposit this passage, but use it as an intro. This city, Athens, was full of idols. Aphrodite and Hermes, and Zeus and Artemis and Hades and Poseidon. Gods and goddesses of war and power, of beauty and business, of fertility and health. Luke says Paul's spirit was provoked within him. He knew that if the gospel was to have an impact here, Jesus Christ had to replace these idols. Christ had to unseat these idols from their thrones in these people's lives.

And Paul uses an interesting tack. As he was wandering through the city he saw that they even had a shrine to 'the unknown god.' Despite the fact that they had this complete pantheon of idols, they either knew that something was missing, that despite all these gods there was still a hole that needed filling by a god they didn't yet know, or they were worried that something might be missing, that they might not have all their spiritual bases covered and just in case there was another god that they needed to pay homage to, they built a shrine to him as well, the unknown god.

And so despite them seeming to know everything about any god there could possibly be, Paul says 'I'm going to tell you about the God you don't know about.' You can fill your life, your city with these counterfeit gods that Paul says in v29 are made by the art and imagination of man, but you're still missing out.

Nice bit of history, but what relevance has that to me? I'm trying to get ahead at school, I've got my kids, my marriage, my work to worry about and 1st century Greek gods and goddesses just aren't my problem. Well, this morning I want to help you see that this issue of idols is of direct relevance to you, that idols are alive and well, they're just not made of stone, that our cities, maybe even some of our homes, have shrines to them, and that people –maybe even you-continue to make sacrifices to them. And the reason this matters is because how you handle this stuff has the ability to either mess you up or bring you lasting lifelong joy.

Twenty first century idolatry

Right at the beginning of the Ten Commandments in Ex 20:2-3 God says: 'I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me.' Right at the start of God setting out how He calls you to live with Him, God stakes the claim to number one spot in your life. No other gods are to take His place. And when something else does take His place the Bible calls it idolatry.

But there's a problem here, because the moment you start talking about idols and idolatry images start flashing into your mind. Either you'll start thinking about Pop Idol or American Idol, or you'll start thinking about Canaanite fertility gods, or some of these Greek gods Paul encountered, or you'll not get past thinking about the Hindu deities worshipped in India. And if you get stuck there, you'll miss the point.

Because what God goes onto say in Ex 20 in the Ten Commandments is 'don't make for yourself a god out of anything that is in heaven above, or the earth beneath. Don't bow down to them or serve them.' In other words, it is possible to make an idol out of anything in all of creation.

And the Bible tells us that one of the fundamental problems with mankind, one of the reasons we are in the mess we are in, is that we worship the wrong things, bow down to the wrong things, make sacrifices to the wrong things. The Apostle Paul says in Rom 1:23 that mankind has 'exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images...' Then in v25: - 'they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature (that doesn't have to be an animal, it is anything that is created, anything other than God) rather than the creator.'

So what is an idol? It is anything that serves as an alternative to God, anything that takes the place that only God should occupy. And that can be true on the level of the culture you live and work in as well as on the level of your individual life.

Just think about your home country, or the culture you come from or currently mix with: your school, college, or work environment. If I were to ask you what is the god of that culture, the god of your work or college environment, what is the deity, what is the idol that is worshipped, what do people bow down to, what is the god that people make sacrifices to, what would you respond?

I asked that question in home-group this week about the cultures we have come from in our home nations, and we got some fascinating answers. Our home group has people from America, India, Switzerland, Kenya, Nigeria, Puerto Rico, Britain and South Africa. It's a foretaste of heaven (especially as the British are in control). Here are some of the national or cultural idols that we recognise people bowing down to - and you can play guess the nation: Individualism - me as god. Money (not amongst the wealthy necessarily, but among the poor, because they think money is the answer). Fear, because fear -fear of crime- dominates people's lives - what they spend their money on, where they live, how they live. The idol of how others see you, your position within the community - that's the god you make sacrifices to, to appease the god of how people see you.

But what is it for those of you in college or the workplace? Maybe it is acceptance by your friends or peers and you'll make sacrifices for that, maybe its being hip, or the pursuit of wealth and profit, or maybe if your culture is more arty or alternative it's the opposite of those things.

But then there are the idols, the counterfeit gods that promise so much and that perpetually present themselves to us as individuals to bow down to. Things that take the place of God in your life. Now again, I don't want you to think I'm saying that we dispense with God completely, I'm addressing here the stuff that competes for number one place in your life. 2nd Kings 17:33 says of the people of Israel 'they feared the Lord but also served their own gods'. They served God, but they didn't serve him alone. Other gods had their attention. God did not occupy number 1 spot.

And Paul writing to Timothy says (2 Tim 3:2-4): 'People will be lovers of self, lovers of money...lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God.' You can take just about anything and make it into an idol in your heart; Paul says it can be yourself, or money or pleasure. But it can just as easily be video games, entertainment, your family, sports, a romantic relationship, sex, beauty, the pursuit of career success, esteem amongst your peers.

And the point is that these things are not of themselves necessarily bad. Many of these things are good, and right and proper. But they become idols when we elevate them and promote them into the ultimate, supreme thing in our lives. When they take centre stage, when our happiness depends on these things, when they are essential, when this is what controls and drives us, this is what we bow down to, that as Tim Keller says, lose this and your life hardly seems worth living, then they have become an idol.

And once they have that place we sacrifice to them. We say child sacrifice is way a thing of the past, but how many children and marriages and families continue to be sacrificed on the altar of the pursuit of wealth or career advancement or academic success. How many have sacrificed Jesus Christ for the pursuit of a boyfriend or girlfriend.

So idols are alive and well in the 21st century: they just don't have to have 7 heads and 14 arms and be carved from stone. They are anything, even good things, that take the ultimate place in your heart and life, the place of worship, that is reserved for God alone. And if we allow other stuff to take that place it inevitably has consequences.

The inevitable consequences of idols

Why is it that we give these things the ultimate place in our lives? Why can the pursuit of money, or your physical appearance, or a romantic relationship, or career success take the supreme, controlling place in your life? Why can your desire to fit in with your friends at school become of all consuming? The answer is because we think that they will give us the joy, the peace, the hope, the security or the fulfilment that we long for. We look to these things because we think that they will satisfy us. Sadly, as many of us have learnt the hard way, they let us down. And that is the 1st consequence of making these things the ultimate thing.

And the reason they let us down, is not because they are bad, it's because they are not good enough. We take created things: money, family, relationships, career, and think that they can take the place of the Creator in our lives. We build our lives on them, we make them the foundation of our lives. The problem is that when they give way, either the financial markets dive, or a relationship breaks up, or your friends turn on you, or your career stumbles, your life can crumble with your foundation. Because they're not meant to be built on. Jesus Christ is the only sure foundation to build on. Anything else will always disappoint.

But idols can do worse than disappoint. The Bible tells us that they can ensnare us. That's the 2nd consequence. Looking back over the history of his people the writer of Psalm 106 says in v36: 'They served their idols, which became a snare to them.' When a good thing becomes an ultimate thing in your life, it begins to exert control over you – you begin to serve it, rather than the other way round. It can dominate your life, it ensnares you and traps you and you struggle to get free from it. Money goes from being something useful, to something that has you by the throat. Sex, given by God for children and for pleasure in marriage becomes something you can't do without and you're hooked on porn. Your work, once a desire simply to honour God and provide for your family takes control of your life and destroys both your family and your relationship with God.

But the problem with idols goes a step further again, it's the 3rd consequence: the bible tells us that those who place something other than God in the centre of their lives, become like that thing: Listen to Ps 115:4-8 *"Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses but do not smell. ⁷They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. ⁸Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them."* In England we have this expression that owners become like their dogs, which should worry those of you with dogs because I've met some of your dogs. But what the psalmist says is that the same is true for those who trust in and worship something other than God. At the least he means that those who worship idols become as insensible to God and as unresponsive to true spiritual things as a block of wood or stone, and at worst he means that idols have a negative transforming effect upon our hearts, that the pursuit of power or success or money or esteem from others as the ultimate thing has a corrupting influence on our hearts.

The fourth consequence of heart idolatry, is specifically for those of you who are already Christians, and that is half-heartedness in your Christian worship. When talking about money, Jesus said 'you cannot serve two masters.' You can't have God as your God at the same time as allowing money to take that place, and that is true for any other idol as well. Allowing anything else to have that ultimate place in your heart, in your affections, inevitably robs God of the worship from your heart that He and He alone deserves.

Now just think about one part of your worship, singing the hymns and songs here on a Sunday morning. If I were to ask you what you thought of the worship music week by week here I know I would get as many different responses as there are bodies in this room. Too many hymns, not enough hymns, the worship leader interrupts the flow too much, there's not enough other stuff. There's too much spontaneity, there's not enough spontaneity. The music's too loud, it's not loud enough. That is one of the joys, and I mean a joy, of being in a church like this when we come from such diverse backgrounds. But, if we focus on those as the issues then we're missing the point.

You see, first and foremost worship is not about music and songs and hymns and psalms. That is just the outward stuff. You know from your own experience that you can mouth the words and there be a total disconnect between what is going on with your lips and in your head and heart. And worship, true worship is about what is going on in your heart. It is about who you love most, who has the preeminent place in your affections.

And when something other than Jesus Christ has that place, when family, or some relationship, or your work, or pornography, or what others think of you is the ultimate thing in your life, it is inevitable that God will not get the heart engaged worship from you that He deserves. Instead He will seem distant, maybe even irrelevant. Your mind will be occupied elsewhere and Christ will come in a poor second.

The final consequence is that the influence of idols goes a long way to explaining why, too often, Christians are indistinguishable from non-Christians. Whether it is divorce rates, or how they use their money, or sex before marriage, or the

purity of our speech, too often it is difficult to spot the difference between Christians and non-Christians. And one reason for that is a failure to confront and deal with the idols in peoples' lives when they first become Christians. But it wasn't that way in Paul's ministry.

Two chapters after the one we just read, in Acts 19, we find Paul in Ephesus, in the middle of a riot. A riot he has provoked. Now, if you read in the newspaper that I had been arrested in Lausanne for provoking a riot, you'd have some questions. So what was Paul up to? The answer is, he has successfully challenged the idols in people's lives and as a consequence of that their behaviour has changed. In particular their spending behaviour has changed, they had stopped buying the silver idols of the goddess Artemis or Diana, and so the silversmiths saw their business disappearing and rioted against Paul. And the ring leader, Demetrius, gives us a clue how Paul did it: Acts 19:26: 'you see and hear that not only in Ephesus but almost in all of Asia, this Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods.'

That was the reason for this dramatic change in the lives and the spending habits of these new converts. That was why that society was being turned upside down, not because they could accept Jesus and still cling to their idols, but because through the preaching of Paul they were confronted by the sole claim of Jesus Christ to the number one place in their lives, and that this other stuff that had previously filled that place could never satisfy them as Christ could, that these other gods are no gods at all, and they embraced that wholeheartedly and their society was turned upside down. And we could sure do with some of that today: wholehearted discipleship.

Getting rid of the idols

So what do you do? What should you do if listening to me this morning you have become aware that something or other is either doing a pretty good job of competing with God for the ultimate spot in your life, or, frankly, has displaced God?

If you're not yet a Christian and you realise that to date you have sought your fulfilment, joy or security in places other than Jesus, you can build on a far more secure foundation. When talking about the worries of money and clothing and housing Jesus said 'seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these other things will be added to you.' What we do is we seek all these other things first and get it the wrong way round.

Instead Jesus calls us to love Him with all our heart and all our soul and with all our mind. To love Him wholeheartedly. And when we do that, life comes into sync. Doesn't mean it's going to be a bed of roses, or at least if it is the thorns are left on, but it does mean you are beginning to live life as your Creator intended it, with Him, not this other stuff, at the centre.

But what about those of us who are Christians? What do you do if you realise something else has your heart? The first thing is to recognise it. Just be honest with yourself that something else, good or bad, has become an ultimate thing. And for others of you, whilst I am not advocating you descend into a pit of navel

gazing, if you feel cold toward God or distant from Him in your worship I want to ask you to consider whether something else has your heart. David says to God in Ps 139: 'search me O God and know my heart! See if there be any grievous way in me.' So, if you know things aren't right, ask God, by His Spirit, to search your heart, and then be real honest about it with Him.

And after recognition comes repentance. And that is a two-way thing. So ask God to give you the help and the strength and the wisdom you need to take whatever steps are necessary, practical if necessary, to dethrone the idol from your heart. That's turning away. But then comes the turning to: Making God your God without competitors.

And you can do that when you realise just who He is and what He has done for you in Jesus Christ. No illustration can do this justice, but the difference between anything else, good or bad having the ultimate spot in your heart and Jesus Christ having that place is the difference between any one of the thousands of little worthless stones that get stuck in your shoe and one of Michaelangelo's sculptures. There simply is no comparison. Which one would you rather put on the pedestal? Which one is worthy of your attention? Which is of greater value? And Michaelangelo's sculptures are just created things. How much more valuable, how much more to be worshipped is Jesus Christ, the creator of all things. And then there is what he has done for you: that at the cross His love and mercy and grace and forgiveness was poured out and made freely available to you.

Nothing else is worthy of your life or your worship. He is worthy of it all. And if you spend your life on anything else, you are wasting it. So decide again today to pursue Him with all your heart, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live a life that brings worship and glory to Him, in all that you do. With Him as your God.