

## ***idolatry: the sin beneath the sin***

If you have just joined us today, we are in our third week of a fall study called "**Life With God for the World**" – a study exploring God's desire and intention for the gospel of Jesus Christ to transform **our** lives, our life as a **community**, and ultimately, our life **in the world**...

All with an aim toward **GOD's heart for our world**... Not just **for us**, but **for OUR WORLD**.

That's where we started this study a few weeks back – hearing God's invitation to the Israelites in exile (in Jer 29) to not just persevere and survive their exile in Babylon, but to **seek the Peace of Babylon**. To seek and follow God **IN the City - FOR the sake of the city**... for the sake of God's Presence and Peace and Reign over *all* **to be known and enjoyed by all**.

Which, in the mystery of God's ways, God is seeking to work out **in and through us**... through a people who, as we seek and follow Jesus, are being drawn, by grace, into a **Life with God for the World**...

And so this study necessarily begins with **US** – with **our** hearts and our lives. *Because unless our hearts and lives are truly invaded, animated and transformed by the gospel, the gospel will not be experienced as **good news for the world**...*

And so today we are going to spend some time talking about one of the **big ideas** / one of the **dominant themes** that emerges again and again in God's dealing with his people + what I'm referring to is reality of **IDOLATRY**.

Which might not seem like **an obvious issue** for many of us - in our culture and in our day - but, as we'll discover as we listen to scripture and our own daily lives, **it is, in fact, a very real + pressing matter.**

One that God takes very seriously - **and thank God He does.**

Now before we can say anything about idolatry, we need to acknowledge that that one of the most central claims of the Jewish and Christian Bible is that **THERE IS ONE GOD.**

This is possibly the most basic doctrine in the Bible: there is One God who is over ALL. One God who **created** all - and who **rules** over all - and who alone is worthy to be **worshipped** by all.

This is the fundamental claim of the opening verse of the Bible. **Gen 1:1**

*"In the beginning **God** created the heavens and the earth."*

**In our day**, it is common and accepted to believe that the world came into existence as a result of fascinating, incredible, but fundamentally natural processes - with no place or need for divine activity. **In the ancient world**, it was common and accepted to believe that the world had been created by the shared work of **many** gods. For example, the Babylonian "creation story",

commonly known as the *Enuma Elish*, lists "no fewer than nine separate gods, each with its own part to play in the event leading up to creation." (John Dickson).

Either way, in the ancient world and today, the claim of Genesis 1 is a **bold claim**, but one that the whole of Scripture affirms... That there is **One God** who **created** all things - and who **rules** over all things - **including us**.

And this God, according to Genesis, created us **(1) to know and worship Him** - and **(2) to rule over all things in God's Name** (or, in tune with how God works).

**Genesis 1:26-28**

*Then God said, "Let us make human beings **in our image, in our likeness**, so that they may **rule** over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."*

Note the vital link between our mandate to "rule" and our being made "in God's image"... This is important because it reframes our rule not as that of kings or queens, but as that of an ambassador - charged to rule in ways that represent the will and ways of our Sovereign... This is what humanity is created for - to worship God and rule under Him (in ways that reflect His ways)...

**And it was gift.** Because when life takes this shape - *with God at the center of our lives and our daily work a reflection of God's work* - the result is

### **God's Shalom for all...**

God's **blessing**: creation flourishing - humanity flourishing - in the glory and rule and reign of God...

This is why I so often repeat the refrain - "*for God's glory, for the sake of the world, and for our joy Him*" - because this is how God made the world to work. As one theologian has famously said, "When God is most glorified, we are most satisfied." Because God is **Good**.

AND YET, sadly, as Genesis 3 goes on to explain, the story of Shalom is quickly derailed as humanity chose to abandon this life of **worshipping God** and **ruling** under God - and instead chose to worship **created** things, and ended up **enslaved** to them.

It's what the apostle Paul tells us **Romans 1:21-25**. [If you have a Bible with you, turn with me to Romans 1:21-25.] **Romans 1:21-25**

*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and **exchanged** the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.*

Do you hear God's design being flipped on its head?

(v.24) *Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual immorality for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They **exchanged** the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator.*

Hear that last line:

*They **exchanged** the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator...*

Do you feel the fundamental **insanity** of this? That God created us to worship Him and **rule** over creation with Him - and in this, be **blessed**... But instead, we have chosen to worship and serve **created** things - and have ended up **enslaved** and degraded...

Which highlights two things to us. First, that idolatry is not just one sin on the list of options, but it is in fact **the sin beneath all our sin**. This the sin in the Garden of Creation, and the sin beneath all our sin...

And second, with that, Paul's words highlight that idolatry is not just foolish - ridiculous, even - but it is, in fact, **destructive + dehumanizing**. It leads to **disintegration** - of our minds, our hearts, our desires, our relationships, and *ultimately even our bodies*...

Just **listen** to Paul's outline of the accumulative damage of idolatry. He says they turned from God to worship and serve created things - **and as a result**: *their thinking became futile - their foolish hearts became darkened - they*

*became fools - their desires become distorted - their will followed after their  
corrupt desires - their relationships and bodies were degraded...*

Idolatry is not just foolish. It is destructive.

Rather than liberating us, it dehumanizes us.

We become less than God created us to be.

Which is not a perspective **unique** to the apostle Paul. This is something  
that God declares again and again throughout scripture - that **we become  
like what we worship.**

And I can't think of a passage that says this more concisely than

**Jeremiah 2:5** - where God says of his wayward people,

*"They followed worthless idols **and became worthless themselves.**"*

What a horrifically **sad** statement.

*"They followed worthless idols **and became worthless themselves.**"*

**Psalm 115:1-8** describes the same...

*Not to us, LORD, not to us  
But to **your name** be the glory,  
Because of **your** love and faithfulness.  
Why do the nations say,  
"Where is your God?"  
Our God is in heaven;  
He does whatever pleases him.*

*But their idols are silver and gold,  
Made by human hands.  
They have mouths, but cannot speak,  
Eyes, but cannot see.  
They have ears, but cannot hear,  
Noses, but cannot smell.  
They have hands, but cannot feel,  
Feet, but cannot walk,  
Nor can they utter a sound with their throats.  
**Those who make them will be like them,  
And so will all who trust in them.***

In other words: **We become like what we worship.**

And so if we worship something, anything other than or less than the One True Living God, **we will** become less than what God created us to be.

Which is why [thank GOD] as we read the pages of the Bible, we discover **GOD'S PASSIONATE HATRED FOR and VIOLENT OPPOSITION TO any and every form of idolatry.** **Hear this: GOD HATES IDOLATRY!**

**Not** because God is self-centred and insecure - desperately needing our affection. No, it's **because HE LOVES US and ALL OF CREATION.**

God hates idolatry because He knows that if our hearts run after other things, lesser things - we will become lesser things. We'll be oppressed and will become oppressors ourselves.

Just think of the 10 Commands and how they begin.

**Exodus 20:2-3** - *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."*

Notice that He doesn't **simply** command Israel (and us) to not worship other gods. No, He prefaces this command by reminding them (and us) that HE IS THE GOD who SAVES... who DELIVERS... who RESCUES from slavery...

**Why is this important to understand?** Because it helps us see that worshipping and serving God - the One True God - brings freedom and life.

Where worshipping idols **destroys** us, worshipping God **brings life** - to us and to all.

Which is often not the way we think, is it? We often think that freedom is found in having **no** god over us. Or in serving **no** one.

**But it's simply not an option.** Because, the truth is, we **will all** worship and serve **someone** or **something**. This is part of being human. We are **wired** to worship and serve someone or something.

Which means - the question is never:

**Will we worship?** And **will we serve?**

But - **who** or **what** will we worship?

**Who** or **what** will we serve?

And **can** and **will** the object of our worship truly give us life?

## Ok, so what does this have to do with us...?

Well - as I'm sure you can understand - just because we don't have an image of **Ganesh** or a statue of **Vishnu** on our mantel, does not mean that we are not idolatrous, right?

Truth is, **we can make an idol out of anything.**  
And we do, *don't we?*

Most often, it's **GOOD THINGS** that we end up turning - subtly or not so subtly - into **Ultimate** things. Which is exactly the definition of an idol. Some **thing** that we turn into AN **ULTIMATE** THING.

To quote Timothy Keller, "An idol is anything more fundamental than Jesus Christ to your happiness, meaning in life, or identity."

Some **thing** that we can't live without.

Some **thing** that all of our hope and joy depends upon.

Some **thing** that we cling to as **more essential** to life for us - than the *Living God Himself*.

Some **thing, person or idea** (even) that hold our deepest allegiance, and for which we would sacrifice all else - even Jesus...

Not that we'd ever say this about something - but our lives tell this story. Our daily lives tell a story of what or whom we worship.

It may be bound up in attaining or maintaining a career, or the love of a certain person, or a certain marital status, or spiritual reputation, or sexual

fulfilment. It may be comfort, or ease, or being needed, or being healthy. It may be the constant experience of pleasure, or a certain body image. It may be being honored or being the one who is in control. It may be the success of your children, or the acceptance of your parents or peers.

**We can make an idol out of anything. And we do, don't we?**

Not that these things are bad. In fact, none of the things I just mentioned are inherently bad. **They are all good things.** BUT WHEN THEY BECOME **ULTIMATE** THINGS - when we begin to live for them, to orient our lives around them, and place our hearts deepest hope in them - they have become an idol for us... An idol which will increasingly come **to rule + deform us**, and rob us of the Life that can only come through worshipping and serving the One True Giver of life - God himself.

**Ok, so how do we identify OUR idols?**

Well, as I'm sure you realize, in a seemingly secular society like ours, identifying **our** idols is not a matter of looking to see what sits on our mantel at home, but looking to see what lives large in our hearts + in our days - what gets us up in the morning, and what keeps us going...

Discerning our idols is not about whom we sing to on Sunday morning, but who or what our hearts run after the rest of the week. Or even, *while* we

sing on Sunday morning. Who or what we daydream about, or what we most fear losing or never attaining.

I remember years ago hearing Rick McKinley (a pastoral mentor I've referenced before) speak on this topic and he boiled it down to one question. He asked: *What gives your life meaning and you worth?*

Answer that and you will know what you worship. You'll know your idol.

Or it might be more helpful to consider the opposite:

*What thing if it were **absent** or **taken** from your life might take away your desire to live?*

*What thing, if it were absent from your life, would rob you of all hope?*

I think for me - the most helpful way of discerning this has been to complete the sentence: "As long as \_[you fill in the blank]\_, I'll be ok."

I've often pictured the Egyptian Pharaoh, in the days of the plagues of Exodus, saying to himself, "As long as **I can appease Amon-Re**, I'll be ok".

Which might seem crazy to us - but **we all do it** at times.

**We** think or say things like:

- *As long as I can get married...*
- *As long as my kids are happy... or on the right path...*
- *As long as people need me...*
- *As long as I can make my own decisions...*
- *As long as I'm in control...*
- *As long as I'm financially secure...*
- *As long as I'm sexually fulfilled, or free to be sexually active...*
- *As long as I'm respected and sought after..... **I'll be ok.***

And listen: **none** of these things are wrong to desire, **but when they become ULTIMATE** - when they become more essential than Jesus Christ to our happiness, meaning in life or identity - **then they have become an idol for us**. An idol that will enslave and deform us - and will hijack the work of the gospel in and through us.

### So, what are we to do?

What are we to do when we recognize that our heart and life has been taken captive by the worship of some **Thing** or some **One** other than God?

Well, first, we need to recognize that this isn't just a one-time event. This is something that we will need to **continually** revisit **throughout** our lives...

For as John Calvin wisely wrote, **"The human heart is an idol factory"**.

And we live in an idolatrous world.

And so, because of this, we will need to **regularly** invite God to search our hearts and reveal to us where we have bought into a lie and run after false-gods/**idols**.

But having **done** that - **what are we to do?**

Well, one perspective would say: **JUST STOP! Stop** worshipping whatever it is you are worshipping, and **chose** to worship God.

But it's not that simple. Why? Because behind every act of idolatry is a lie - a lie about the idol and a lie about God... A lie about the gospel.

As Martin Luther, the Reformer, once wrote, "Under every behavioral sin is the sin of idolatry, and under every act of idolatry is a disbelief in the gospel."

A disbelief inspired by a lie - about the idol and about God...

And so, **unless we deal with the lies, expose them, and replace them with the truth** - the truth about the idol - and the truth about the gospel of God - we will continue to find ourselves drawn back to whatever it is we have been worshipping. [Which is why many of us struggle with the same things for years.]

**WHICH MEANS** then - that to truly turn from our idolatry to worship and serve the Living God - requires us to learn and embrace a life of **repentance + rejoicing**. [I'm borrowing this language directly from Timothy Keller - who draws it directly from scripture...]

First of all, we need to learn the way of **REPENTANCE** - in the NT sense of the word: **metanoia** - which literally means to "think again" or to "rethink reality in the light of new information"...

And we need this - if we are to turn from our idolatry, **we need to repent** - not simply to say we are sorry, but to name not just our idols, but the **lies that we have believed about them**... to name before God and before

ourselves (and maybe others) that we have believed a lie that some Thing is an Ultimate thing - that it will truly save and satisfy us. That it will make us whole.

That it will give us life...

**Which is a lie - because it can't.** Only **Jesus** can truly save and satisfy us. Only Jesus can make us whole. Only Jesus can give us Life...

And I say this from experience. I know as I reflect on my own journey of wrestling with sin and idolatry in my own life - this has been *and continues to* be a **crucial** practice. Naming the **lies**. Exposing them. Calling them to mind.

Because without this, I just end up back pursuing the same things again... And so I've learned that I need to **continually repent**.

**And with this, to REJOICE.** And by that I'm referring to our need to *not just* name the lie about the sin or the idol - but, with this, **to turn to Jesus + fix our hearts on *the beauty and truth of Jesus and His Gospel***. Of who He is and what He has done, is doing and will do - that He is the LORD of Life - and in Him is LIFE. And that His gospel is for you and for me...

**And, with this, to pray** and **ask God to fill us** with this TRUTH - this knowledge - this vision - this hope - that the gospel, the gospel of who God is and what He has done, is doing and will do - would increasingly and truly win over the affection of our hearts - liberate us from lies we've believed - and lead

us to worship Him alone - to worship the One who alone is truly worthy of our worship... the One who alone can and will truly save and satisfy us...

**So, friends, what idols are you tempted to worship?  
What lies are you tempted to believe - about God and  
about someThing or someOne else?**

Invitation to the table -----

And with all this in mind, we're going to let our response today be shaped by coming together to receive the Lord's Supper... Which, if you think about the historic practice of idolatry in many places - involves offering food for the gods. And yet, the Gospel is the exact opposite - inviting us to a shared table **where God Himself feeds us - with Himself...**

And in this, declares to us (again and again) that **the God we have rejected for idols - has not rejected us** - but, in grace, has come **seeking us...** Has offered up His life for us - has died the death we deserve (at the cross)... And was raised to life again - that now we would be set free from the idols that enslave us and led again and again to seek and find our life in Him - a life with God for the world...

What an incredible gift of grace - that we desperately need.

**If you know** that you need this grace - if you know that you have rejected God and worshipped and served lesser things - and that you need His grace today - then, please, come - come take the bread and the cup today - and let it be both an expression of your **repentance** and reason for you to **rejoice** - that God's life is open and available to **you**...

**Instructions:** So, as Janet and Simon lead us in a song,

- Come forward in the **two main side aisles**
- We want to invite those in the **back of the room to come first**, and then we will simply work our way forward. As you see the row behind you file out, feel free to join the queue...
- And when you come to the station, we invite you to receive the elements and **then take them back to your seat** to consume them **as you worship**.
- If you have dietary concerns, there is **GF wafers** available at each station.
- And for those who feel **uncomfortable** with the crowd, there is a station at the back where you can simply go and take the elements for yourself.

There's no rush.

Let's come to Christ today + receive the grace that alone can set us free.