

Date: May 15, 2022

Series: *Building Inspection: Things That Tear Down the Church*

Title: *Idolatry*

Text: Psalm 135:5-7, 15-18; Exodus 20:4-6

Preacher: Mark Adams

Psalm 135:5-7

5 – I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.

6 – The LORD does whatever pleases Him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.

7 – He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from His storehouses.

Psalm 135:15-18

15 -The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men.

16 – They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see.

17 – They have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths.

18 – Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

Exodus 20:4-6

4 – You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.

5 – You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me,

6 – but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

If you have children of pretty much any age, then I imagine two of the most frequently used words in your home are, *“NOT ME.”* You parents know what I’m talking about right? Sure, you do---because these five letters form the response to almost any question we ask our kids. For example, you go downstairs and find the family room empty, but the television blaring and you ask, *“Who left the TV on?”* The response is always, *“NOT ME!”* In the morning you start to fix yourself a quick nutritious whole wheat breakfast but you find the Cheerio’s box wide open and the cereal inside has lost its crunch and become stale. But when you ask who failed to close the lid your kids say, *“NOT ME!”*

How many of you moms and dads have heard those two words more than you wanted to? Isn’t it frustrating?! I tell you what---let’s process our frustration right now, with a little *“frustrated parent’s rally.”* I’ll share some more examples of when we hear these words and if you can identify with them---and want to show your frustration---respond with this standard come back and do so with gusto! Ready?

“Who left the toilet paper holder empty?” – NOT ME

“Who left the top off the tooth paste tube?” – NOT ME

“Who left dried up egg-yolk-encrusted dishes in the sink?” – NOT ME

“Who ate all the OREOS?” – NOT ME

“Who left the garage door open all night?” – NOT ME

“Who neglected to put the milk back in the fridge?” – NOT ME

“Who likes short sermons?” – NOT ME

Good! You came to the right church!

I remind you of these two popular parenting words not to make any children present feel guilty---but rather because the truth is that we ADULTS often embrace this same childish attitude when it comes to certain sins. We proudly think, we're not guilty---sure, others may trespass in these ways but---NOT ME.

This is especially true when it comes to one of the main threats to BUILDING UP A CHURCH---the sin of IDOLATRY. I mean, it's so easy for us to assume, *"Idolatry is something that was practiced by ancient pagan people thousands of years ago. That's an 'Old Testament' issue! We don't prostrate ourselves before statues these days. Idolatry has gone the way of bubonic plague. People in the past may have suffered from it---but not today---and certainly not ME."*

Well, to help you begin to realize how foolish this *"not me"* way of thinking is, let's get an accurate definition of this sin. So---WHAT IS IDOLATRY? Basically, it is misplaced WORSHIP. It's moving God out of His rightful place as absolute LORD of our day to day lives---and replacing Him with something or someone else.

And with this definition in mind, it's obvious that IDOLATRY is indeed still a problem---because we may not bow down to statues these days---but there are so many ways that we remove God from His rightful place---and REPLACE Him with other things. And the idol of "things" is definitely a biggie. We are constantly tempted to "worship" this particular idol. Ads that pop up on our laptops and smartphones---commercials in the shows we stream---they all lure us into making this or that THING a priority in our lives.

Every good advertising or network executive knows that the objective of the ads that pop up on our phones and stream on our TVs is to absolutely "capture" as many people as possible. They want to capture our attention---our interest---our money---our time---our commitment---all things that should be "captured" by God.

John Stankey, the current CEO of AT&T, was clear about his goals as he addressed his new employees at the just-acquired HBO franchise. Referring to the time viewers spend watching HBP programs Stankey said, *"We need hours a day. It's not hours a week, and it's not hours a month. We need hours a day. You are competing with devices that sit in people's hands that capture their attention every 15 seconds. I want more hours of engagement. Why are more hours of engagement important? Because you get more data and information about a customer that then allows you to do things like monetize through alternate models of advertising as well as subscriptions."*

Does that sound like a "call to worship" or what?! Sure it does. I mean, there's a reason social media platforms and streaming services are called *"attention merchants."* They are working hard to capture our attention. Some people also call it *"adhesiveness"* because the longer they can get us to stick around, the more money they make. Advertisers are trying to get us to focus our lives on their products---and truth be told too many of us do that.

Of course, there are LOTS of other modern-day idols, entertainment, leisure, relationships, fashion, sexual indulgence, political activism, etc.---but the fact is ALL these modern-day idols aren't the REAL idol. No---they are just a front---they are symptoms of our WORSHIP of this world's most popular idol---the false god of SELF. This is why Dr. Laura Schlessinger's once warned, *"One could read the Second Commandment as follows: 'Do not make your SELF an idol.'" And too many of us do that---and one of the easiest places to see this "self-worship" is on social media. Our posts on FACEBOOK and INSTAGRAM are done to make our SELF seen and admired---validated and many times---in a sense, "worshipped."*

There are too many sad stories to tell of these people who think of themselves as *"Internet gods"* but I'll share a couple:

This young woman visited Auschwitz and shared these pictures on her Instagram---tight-rope walking on the rails that carried hundreds of thousands on trains into the concentration camp---smiling as she stood between the buildings that housed the gas chambers. She put her SELF above this place---this memorial to the millions of men, women, and even children who were put to death here during WW2.

This young woman posted for pics in a botanical conservatory---tramping on rare plants to get some good pictures and was rightfully thrown out.

Finally, this individual posed for pics while touring Chernobyl oblivious to both the radiation---and to all the people who died there. Another way we worship self is in the way we idolize our personal feelings. We encourage each other to do what FEELS good regardless of the consequences. This reminds me of an anonymous poem that I came across years ago. It goes like this:

*"I'm going to sit down and make myself a god.
I'll have a faith that won't make me seem odd.*

*I want this god available when it is convenient.
Of course, his doctrines will be ever so lenient.*

*I'm going to create my own god you see.
Because I don't want my god embarrassing me."*

Well, like this anonymous poet, more and more people in our culture commit the same sin as Aaron and the people of Israel did at the foot of Mt. Sinai. When the God of the Bible is too demanding, we remake him according to our own SELFISH desires.

Russel Board, a retired IMB missionary, once pointed out that Christians are often just as guilty of idolatry when they talk of, "...accepting Christ" or "asking Jesus into my life." He says, "We think, 'Well my life is pretty full, but I'll try to squeeze Him in. I believe I can spare some time on Sunday mornings. And having Jesus around sounds like a good way to enhance my quality of life so I'll accept Him.' He warns, "We verge on blasphemy when we downplay the demands of Christ. Jesus Christ is not a cute little god of good fortune. He's Lord of Heaven and Earth."

Well, to sum this all up, let me say that whenever anything other than God becomes the absolute focus of our attentions and activities, that is idolatry. Nothing in OUR lives---especially not SELF---should make God take a back seat. Nothing should interfere with our relationship with Him. God must always be FIRST.

In fact, let's take that word and make it an acronym that we can use for a little self-examination---to see if God is FIRST in our lives.

"F" stands for "FOCUS."

What is it that you focus on most these days? What has your eye? What are you watching? What are you listening to? In Colossians Paul tells us to "**set your mind on things above, not on the things that are on earth.**" (3:2). Paul's talking about our focus. Are you focusing on THINGS ABOVE---ETERNITY-IMPACTING THINGS?

"I" stands for "INCOME."

What do you spend your money on? We tend to pour our dollars into things that are meaningful to us. So, if someone were to evaluate what's important to you based on your checkbook register, what would they say? Jesus said, "**Where your treasure is, there your heart be also.**" (Matthew 6:21). Where is YOUR treasure these days?

"R" is for "RELATIONSHIPS."

Who is influencing your life? Who is in your inner circle? Who do you go to when you need some counsel? Perhaps even a better question is this: Who are you trying to please? Who are you trying to impress? Whose eye are you trying to catch?

"S" stands for "SPIRITUAL DIET."

How is your spiritual diet? What place does the Word of God really have in your life? Have you cracked open your Bible since last Sunday? Are you feasting on the Word of God on a regular basis? Peter says, "**Like newborn babes long for the pure milk of the Word.**" (1st Peter 2:2). Is that you?

“T” stands for “TIME.”

How do you spend your time? We all need time for important relationships, time for work, and time for play. But it’s amazing to me how many hours we can spend doing things that really aren’t that necessary or important, and then when it comes to the things of God we say, *“I don’t have time for that.”* Scripture says, ***“Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time because the days are evil.”*** (Ephesians 5:15–16).

Well, as we ask ourselves these questions we must remember, whenever we allow anything other than God to rule us, compel us, or control us, we have created an idol. Whenever we look to something other than God to fulfill our deepest needs, satisfy our longings, give us hope or define our identity we have slipped into idolatry. As Martin Luther pointed out, *“Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that IS your god.”*

Now---of course God is opposed to this sin just as He is to all sin---and it’s easy to see this because our Heavenly Father doesn’t hide his feelings about idolatry. He tells us exactly how he views this sin---and not just in Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5 where He lists the top ten.

This week I read about a first grade Sunday School class that was learning the Ten Commandments, and they got to, ***“Thou shalt not commit adultery.”*** Of course, the teacher was worried he would have to explain what adultery meant. So she sighed with relief when a seven-year-old raised her hand and asked, *“What does ‘commit’ mean?”* In that same class when they got to, ***“Honor your father and mother,”*** the teacher asked, *“Now does anyone know a commandment for brothers and sisters?”* A little girl raised her hand and said, ***“Thou shalt not kill.”***

All humor aside---God’s command against idolatry is mentioned more than fifty times in the first five books of the Bible. And in all Judaism it was one of only four sins to which the death penalty was attached. So abhorrent was idolatry in God’s sight that in Deuteronomy 7, verses 5 and 16, He commanded: ***“Tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars. Burn their graven images with fire. Do not pity [the idolatrous people you conquer].”***

Why would God be so opposed to this particular sin? Why would He deem it necessary to forbid idolatry over and over and over again in His written Word? Well, basically it’s because as our Creator He knows us better than we know ourselves. And as our Creator and LORD, He can say as all parents do when children question their commands, *“Because I said so!”* Plus, in spite of our tendency toward this sin and all sins, GOD LOVES US so He gives us this law because He knows IDOLATRY can hurt us in so many ways. Let’s review SOME of those things God knows about idolatry. He knows:

1. It is so EASY for us to slip into it.

This is because of how we were made. We were made to worship. And this has become common knowledge. Several physical and virtual magazines have had cover stories over the years that point to scientific research that indicates we are all made---hard-wired---to worship a higher being. And we are---God created us with hearts that long to worship Him.

We see this “hard-wired” LONGING in all cultures. Anywhere you go on this planet---among any tribe or race of people---you will find people engaged in worship of some kind. So---you don’t have to be a scientist to be able to see that there is a God-consciousness in the heart of every human being. Unfortunately, history shows that over and over again that people have taken this natural inclination to worship and instead of directing it in its proper direction---toward God---they have worshiped other things.

In Romans 1:23 & 25 Paul describes this sin when he writes, ***“They have changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds and four-footed beasts--and creeping things who exchanged [or SUBSTITUTED] the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator.”***

Why do we do this? Why is it so easy for us to make this idolatrous substitution? Well, think of it this way. God is unseen---a spirit and a power invisible to our eyes. Well, it is very hard for simple people like you and I to remember and to think about and to worship an UNSEEN God.

We prefer to have something we can see. When the rubber meets the road in life, we want a god we can reach out and touch.

I think this is one reason so many Christians in the past couple years---believers on both sides of the aisle---have made politics their focus. They want a president who does something they can SEE---something they approve of. And often when God is slow to act---or acts in ways that aren't in accordance with their approval---these Christians slip into idolatry as they follow leaders who do things that are NOT pleasing to God.

Don't get me wrong---we should be involved in politics---but only in ways that keep God first. I'm reminded of that anonymous saying, *"There is no right way to do a wrong thing"* and let's be honest---too many political leaders have done WRONG things in the name of "right."

Here's something else God knows about idolatry.

2. It STEALS our freedom.

You see, when we put anyone or anything other than God in charge of our lives, we become slaves to that thing or person. As I just said, we are made to worship a higher being---and this means, YOU AND I WILL BE SLAVES TO SOMETHING OR SOMEONE IN THIS LIFE.

It is unavoidable.

- We were created to be controlled.
- We are programmed to be mastered.
- We were designed to exist in a subservient relationship.

So, the only freedom our Sovereign God gives us is to choose what controls us. Sadly too many of us make the WRONG choice and they lose their freedom. I mean, Think of it.

Someone says, *"I am free to drink as much alcohol as I want."* But then many times the drink masters that person.

The wife of one of my cousins used her freedom of choice to imbibe---and became an alcoholic---alcohol took over her life. It destroyed her marriage---it took away her relationship with her children. And eventually it destroyed her physically. She died as a young woman.

Others say, *"I'm free to smoke pot. It's legal now."* But soon thanks to this stupid---idolatrous law---pot use warps their thinking---and so often leads them to mental illness.

Some say, *"I'm free to have sex without marriage."* But in a month or so they learn a baby is coming---and they realize soon they won't be as free as they thought.

Some deal with this by using their freedom to get an abortion---but then they face all kinds of negative consequences---both physical and psychological effects---things like deep guilt, nervous disorders, insomnia, anxiety, depression---all so serious they had to be treated with medication prescribed by psychiatrists.

Listen, the freedom we long for comes from choosing the best master---and we are designed to function best---free-est---with God at the controls of our lives. As Acts 17:28 says, ***"in Him we live and move and have our being."*** Just as a truck is free to roll far and long if it stays on the highway---just as a train is free and powerful unless it jumps the tracks---so are we free to enjoy God's gift of abundant life so long as we stay under His rule. That's the way we are made. He must be number one. When He is not---when we substitute Him for false gods, we lose our freedom.

Idols are false fronts like you see on movie sets. They look good on the outside but there is nothing behind them to back up their promises of freedom and joy. As the woman at the well discovered, you can drink all you want at the wells of the world but still be thirsty. The only way to satisfy our thirst for freedom is to be in relationship with God. As Jesus said

when He quoted from Isaiah 61: ***“The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me...to proclaim freedom for the prisoners...to set the oppressed free.”*** (Luke 4:18ff)

Here’s another reason God has given us this law. He knows:

3. It HURTS our children and their children and even their children.

Remember the words of the text from Exodus? God says, ***“...for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me.”***

Now understand---God is not saying here that our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be punished for OUR idolatry. No---God is warning us that the way we worship has an impact on our offspring. They follow our example, so they are affected by our decisions.

- If I live indifferently to the things of the Lord,
- If I continually give in to every suggestion of the flesh,
- If I have a love affair with materialism and acquiring things at any cost,
- If I chase after empty, hollow images for the rest of my life, then my children and their children will do this as well.

If God does not have the proper place in my life, then the repercussions will be felt from generation to generation---because our children will COPY our sins.

In 2nd Chronicles 26:16 we read the account of King Uzziah, a godly king up until the latter part of his life when he disobeyed God and side-stepped the temple priests---to burn incense in worship. He made the mistake of thinking that every man can worship God according to the dictates of his own HEART---when in actuality we only truly worship when we worship according to the dictates of God’s WORD! Because of this transgression King Uzziah was stricken with leprosy.

Then, in chapter 27 we read of his son, Jotham, who began to reign when he was 25 refused to enter the temple. His dad had trouble with the church so he did too.

In chapter 28 we read of Ahaz, Uzziah’s grandson who began his reign when he was 20. Ahaz not only stayed away from the temple, he closed its doors and began to worship false gods. He even had his own children sacrificed to these empty images. So, let’s review.

- The father started worshiping God in the wrong way.
- His son quit going to the temple all together
- and his grandson worshiped the devil himself.

So, you see our attitudes toward God affect and influence our children’s attitudes toward God. Because of this principle of parenting, idolatry can have that widespread of an effect!

God also knows idolatry:

4. CHANGES us such that we become LIKE the false gods that we serve.

Listen again to the words of Psalm 135, ***“The idols of the nations are but silver and gold, the work of man’s hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; they have eyes, but they do not see; They have ears, but they do not hear; nor is there any breath at all in their mouths.***

THOSE WHO MAKE THEM WILL BE LIKE THEM.”

Jeremiah 2:5 underscores this fact by saying, ***“They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.”*** So, in other words, we become just like any false image we pursue in life.

- If we worship self, we become selfish.

- If we idolize wealth, then like Charles Dickens' Scrooge, we tend to value it above anything else---even our loved ones.
- If we bow down at the altar of physical beauty, we become shallow people with a "beauty" that is only skin deep.

We do indeed become like that which we worship---and that is sad because we all have a Parent---our Heavenly Father--who wants us to become like Him---not the false, empty images we pursue. As In Romans 8:29 says God's desire is that all His followers be "**conformed to the likeness or IMAGE of His Son.**" In 1st John 3:2 it proclaims the hope that when Jesus returns "**...we shall be LIKE Him.**" So, as the late Ron Mehl put it, "*Why in the world should I waste my time chasing shadows, substitutes, desert mirages, and house-of-mirrors reflections? Why should I serve other lords who aren't lords at all, care nothing for me and never will?*"

So, God hates idolatry because:

- He knows how easy it is to slip into it
- He knows it steals our freedom.
- He knows it hurts our children and grandchildren.
- He knows we become like the idols we worship.

And finally, He knows:

5. It hurts our CHURCH---HIS church.

Colossians 1:18 says, "**Jesus is the Head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy.**" When the members---the body parts of a church---aren't all acknowledging this fact---when they aren't all worshiping Jesus as the HEAD---when the members of that church worship different "idols"---well you can imagine the devastation. They become a schizophrenic body---a church body that cannot experience unity---that cannot be BUILT UP.

One of my favorite movies is Sam Mendes' *1917*. Of course, it's a realistic movie about war---so it's not something you watch with your kids, and it's not something you watch for entertainment. But it is a good movie to watch for EDUCATION. But not only does this powerful film teach us about the horrors of war---it also educates us about what happens when people don't follow the same leader.

You remember the plot. Two British soldiers are ordered to travel through enemy lines to get to another British Unit---made up of 1600 soldiers. You see the officer in this unit has been ordered to attack the Germans because their general thinks the Germans are retreating. Well, the commanding officer of these two soldiers has learned that this is not true---this retreat is just a trap to get these 1600 British soldiers out in the open where it can be destroyed. But the phone lines are down---so the only way to get this information to this battalion is on foot. Well, the two follow the orders of their general and head off. One is killed on the way but the other survives and reaches the officer in charge of these 1600 young British soldiers---but the officer doubts the orders and sends out the attack anyway. Hundreds are killed before he realizes the order was correct and calls off the rest of the attack. What was the problem? These officers were listening to different commanders. One said "GO" and the other said "DON'T GO!"

When a church does that---when its members embrace idolatry---when they all don't acknowledge Jesus as HEAD---that church---instead of being built up---comes tumbling down.

To be BUILT UP---to be a vital tool furthering the Kingdom of God---leading more and more people to faith in Jesus---we each must keep acknowledging Jesus as LORD. Nothing else must take His place.

As we close let me remind you that God has already revealed Himself in an image. He has already given us an IMAGE to worship.

In Jesus God became TOUCHABLE. And Colossians 1:15 says that the Lord Jesus "**is the IMAGE of the invisible God.**" Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus is "**the radiance of God's glory and the exact REPRESENTATION of His being.**" Colossians

2:9 says, ***“In Christ all the fullness of God lives in bodily form.”*** So, God has revealed Himself clearly in His Son. We need look no further. This morning let us evaluate our own lives. Are we idolatrous in any way? Is there anything in our lives that would steal us away from a whole-hearted walk with Christ? And, if after your introspection you find something, I urge you to commit today to cast it away. This morning commit to make God the only “god” you serve. We close with a time to allow you to publicly commit to God’s Lordship. Perhaps God is leading you to put Him first in your life by moving your letter to join this church and work with us side by side in ministering to this community.

Maybe you need to publicly re-dedicate your life to His Lordship. Or maybe you are here and are not a Christian and this morning you feel God leading you to repent of your sin and give your life to Him. Whatever decision you have to make public---we invite you to do so as we stand and sing. Won’t you come as our God leads?