

This morning we are continuing to go through the book of Acts, looking at Luke's account of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church and what we can learn from it about what it means to know God and be His people. We will be in Acts 19 this morning, as we continue to follow Paul's missionary journeys. We will focus on verses 21-41, a passage that has a lot to teach us about idolatry.

**Acts 19:21-41** - After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." <sup>22</sup> He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer. <sup>23</sup> About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way. <sup>24</sup> A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the **craftsmen**. <sup>25</sup> He called them together, along with the workmen in related trades, and said: "Men, you know we receive a good income from this business. <sup>26</sup> And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that man-made gods are no gods at all. <sup>27</sup> There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited, and **the goddess herself**, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty." <sup>28</sup> When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" <sup>29</sup> Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul's traveling companions from Macedonia, and rushed as one man into the theater. <sup>30</sup> Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples **would not let him**. <sup>31</sup> Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater. <sup>32</sup> The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. <sup>33</sup> The Jews pushed Alexander to the front, and some of the crowd shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. <sup>34</sup> But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for **about two hours**: "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" <sup>35</sup> The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: "Men of Ephesus, doesn't all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? <sup>36</sup> Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to be quiet and not do anything rash. <sup>37</sup> You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor **blasphemed our goddess**. <sup>38</sup> If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. <sup>39</sup> If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly. <sup>40</sup> As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's events. In

*that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it."* <sup>41</sup> *After he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.*

In Acts 19, Paul and his missionary team have been sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in Ephesus, and we learn from Demetrius' speech in v. 26 that part of his message is telling them that manmade gods are no gods at all. The idols that they have crafted, and the deities they represent, are not real. They can not save you, they will not fulfill you, they are not worthy of your worship and devotion. In response, a silversmith named Demetrius calls a meeting and tells the people that their profits are taking a hit, along with the goddess Artemis' reputation. And the people riot in response to this message, putting the lives of Paul's companions in jeopardy, until a city clerk steps in to tell them that Paul and his people have done nothing wrong and that if they have any issue with them, they should bring charges against them.

Just as Paul's preaching of the gospel confronted the idols of his time, the gospel continues to confront our idols today. I want to use this passage today to address four questions: What is an idol? What do our idols do to us? And how is worshiping God different than worshiping idols? Helped by Tim Keller's *Counterfeit Gods*.

### **What is an idol?**

The Bible is full of idolatry in the physical, tangible form. You see statues and shrines and altars to gods like Ba'al and Molech and, in this passage, Artemis, who in the Roman pantheon was known as Diana. There were idols for the gods of war, or love, or fertility, or the sea, to which you would sacrifice in order to try to gain favor. As you read through the Old Testament, you find that one of the main ways the writers evaluate whether or not a king of Israel was a good or bad kind was whether or not they tore down the idols in the land or left them up.

In our culture, we may not have physical, tangible idols, but make no mistake, we are not that different than the ancient pagans. We all have idols of the heart that we bow down to and sacrifice to, and every culture does as well. Even the Bible recognizes that idolatry is a heart issue:

*Ezekiel 14:2-3 - Then the word of the LORD came to me: <sup>3</sup> "Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all?"*

And Paul tells us that people have been turning away from God to worship created things since the beginning:

**Romans 1:20-25** - *For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-- his eternal power and divine nature-- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. <sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup> They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator-- who is forever praised.*

Since the beginning, we have foolishly turned away from the God who deserves worship to serve created things instead.

So what is an idol, if it is not a statue? And how do you know you have an idol in your life? **An idol is anything that is more important to your identity and happiness than God. It is anything or anyone that you are looking to in order to give you what only God can give you, to give you significance and security.** Anything can be an idol - money, status, reputation, the approval of others, brains, beauty, love, sex, freedom, individuality, morality, a politician or a social cause. In fact, good things in our life are especially likely to become idols, things that we elevate above God and look to for our identity and happiness. But in the end, we are exchanging the truth of God for a lie, worshiping and serving a created thing that will not deliver on the expectations we put upon it.

**So that's what an idol is. What are some examples of personal and cultural idols?**

**Wealth and status.** Again, we may not have a physical idol. But how many of us are willing to sacrifice family, health, and time because we believe that the idol of wealth and status will give our lives meaning and happiness?

**Beauty and appearance.** We may not kneel before a statue of Aphrodite. But how many women sacrifice to the idol of beauty, willing to forgo food, experience eating disorders, depression in order to receive beauty?

**Image and reputation.** To be seen as a good parent, or a good spouse, or a moral person. I will try to control the environment and other people and hide anything negative in order to maintain that image.

**Love and significant others.** If we can only find someone beautiful who thinks we are beautiful, then we will know our lives have significance.

**Politics and politicians.** How many people have elevated politicians or political parties to a godlike status, believing that if they are in power, then the world will be saved and redeemed? How many are willing to overlook their sins, pledging our allegiance to a political party instead of worshiping God and speaking prophetically towards the political parties and politicians of our world?

**An idol is anything that is more important to your identity and happiness than God. It is anything or anyone that you are looking to in order to give you what only God can give you, to give you significance and security.**

**Underneath these idols are often deeper idols.** The desire for approval. The desire for security and control of the environment. The desire for power and influence.

Tim Keller – *“People with the deep idol of power do not mind being unpopular in order to gain influence. People who are motivated by approval will gladly lose power and control as long as everyone thinks well of them. Some people want lots of money as a way to control their world and life. They don’t spend much and live modestly, keeping it safely invested. Others want money for access to social circles or to make themselves beautiful and attractive. They do spend money on themselves to give them power over others.”*

What are you looking to for your significance and security?

**What about some cultural idols?**

**The pursuit of happiness** – what matters most is my individual happiness. Only I can determine what is good for me, and everyone else must affirm that. The goal of life is to feel good about yourself.

**Freedom** – No one can tell me what to do. I must throw off any cultural restraints and follow my heart. I will sacrifice anything to protect my idol of freedom.

**Materialism** – How much money can I make? And how much profit can our company make? Ethical issues are secondary. Helping others is not as important as making money for ourselves. We need more.

**Fame** – If people glorify me, then I will know my life is meaningful, and I will be happy.

**Progress** – Whatever achievements we are making, or whatever direction we are going is better than the past.

Even elevating something like love of country or people group can turn into racism, and elevating equality can result in hatred towards those who have been given privileges. Anything that gets elevated above God is going to have terrible consequences.

### What do our idols do to us?

**They have a hold over our emotions**, filling us with fear, anger, guilt, disillusionment or despair if they are threatened or lost.

Demetrius and the people riot when their idols are threatened. And we are no different. If your idol is your reputation as a parent, what happens when your child is not doing well? If your idol is a romantic partner, what happens when they don't love you or reject you? If your idol is comfort, what happens when you lose your job? When your idols are threatened, you react. When they are lost, it leads to despair. And when they don't come through for us, it leads to disillusionment.

I do premarital counseling. Marriage expectations. Nothing will ever cause me to question my love for my partner. I do not expect our love to fade. You set yourself up for disillusionment and destruction if you elevate another person and make them an idol.

Marriage therapist Esther Perel put it this way:

*“We come to one person, and we basically are asking them to give us what once an entire village used to provide: give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise.”*

No surprise that so many end up disillusioned and divorced.

But it can be the same with a pastor or a church. What happens when you idolize a pastor or a church, and then you see behind the curtain and there is ugliness there?

Idolatry often leads to disillusionment. Sometimes achieving your dreams can be terrible, because you find that it does not deliver what it promised. And if even your dreams don't deliver, then where do you turn? No wonder so many celebrities are miserable.

*Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote Democracy in America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "A strange melancholy that haunts the inhabitants... in the midst of abundance." Americans believed that prosperity could quench their yearning for happiness, but such a hope was illusory, because "the incomplete joys of this world will never satisfy [the human] heart."*

Our idols have a powerful hold on us, enslaving us, making us willing to sacrifice anything in order to keep them and please them and serve them.

**They have a hold over our mind.** Think about it. Where does your mind naturally go? What do you find yourself daydreaming about? A relationship with a particular person? Material goods? Scenarios for career advancement? Your fears of what might happen? That's probably an idol.

**And they have a hold over our money and time.**

**Matthew 6:21** - *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*

Your money flows effortlessly to your greatest loves.

Listen to the counselor and author David Powlison – *"Has something or someone besides Jesus Christ taken title to your heart's functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight? To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect out of life? What would really make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success?"*

Your idols are not worth the worship you give to them. Expose and smash your idols today.

## How is worshiping God different than idolatry?

Remember how the Ten Commandments started?

*Exodus 20:2-5 - "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> "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. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*

Why does he not want you to idolize anything? Because he knows that idols will never give you what He can. **Only He will fulfill all your desires eternally.** The desire for beauty, for significance, for security, for approval, for glory, for intimacy, for ecstasy, for family, for meaningful work – all of it is promised forever. God is the answer for all the unfulfilled longings of our heart – in part this side of eternity, and in full once we are with Him forever.

As C.S. Lewis put it: *"Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they ever quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, **can really satisfy**. I am not speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we have grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job, **but something has evaded us**... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing."*

Your heart needs to know that God loves and delights in you, that your worth is eternally secure because Jesus died on the cross for your sins, that you can rest secure because He is sovereign over all and is always working everything together for good. We can trust because He will provide what we need.

Secondly, He will confront your personal and cultural idols. Manmade gods are no gods at all. If your god looks like you, it is most likely an idol. If your God's values look like the Republican agenda, or the Democratic agenda, you are probably worshipping an idol.

We live in a culture of expressive individualism, and the same can be true with religion and god. I cobble together my own religion. I have a god who looks like me, likes what I like, disapproves of what I disapprove of. If there is a real God who is the God of the whole world, then He will necessarily challenge every culture at some point. Ours is certainly our expressive individualism.

Not only will He fulfill all your desires eternally, **but a community that worships God supremely will be heaven on earth.**

And look at what happens in Ephesus. As worship of God increases, it has an adverse effect on the idol economy, and they riot. If we are to cease worshipping cultural idols of happiness, freedom, self-fulfillment, materialism, and so on, the world will change. The bars are closing down. Fewer children are born out of wedlock or aborted because we are not living to gratify our own sexual desires but instead treat each other with dignity. More money is going to those in need. Homes are opening up to those who need homes. People are finding joy serving others, not seeking for a happiness and fulfillment that will never be found this side of God. Instead of seeking power, we seek to share power and build relationships with those who do not have influence. If we truly smash our idols and worship God, our community should be entirely different than the world in the realm of power, money, sex, relationships.

What are we to do?

***Colossians 3:1-5*** - *Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. <sup>3</sup> For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. <sup>5</sup> Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.*

Put your idols to death. Those high places were the last 10%. Your idols are the cause of so much of your grief in life. You are looking to something or someone



other than God to satisfy you and to give you significance and security, and it has enslaved your emotions, your mind, and your money. You are sacrificing to it, and it is not giving you what you want it to. Put it to death. Smash the idol. Worship the Lord.