

CONFRONTING IDOLATRY, PART 1

Applying Word 1 in Deut 5:6–10

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How pleasant and fitting to praise the Lord together. He is more timeless than the universe, more powerful than a tornado, more radiant than the sun, and more lovely than fall colors. He is the one worthy of our highest allegiance and devotion, and we gather today to declare his praises and to remind our souls that “[Yahweh] is God; there is no other beside him” (Deut 4:35; cf. 10:17; Ps 95:3).

My last sermon introduced Deuteronomy’s Ten Commandments, which Moses calls the Ten Words or Decalogue (Deut 4:13; 10:4; cf. Exod 24:28). We overviewed the initial three, Word 1 addressing Worldview and Worship (Deut 5:6–10), Word 2 considering Daily Witness (5:11), and Word 3 focusing on Israel’s weekly household patterns (5:12–15). Following up on some discussions with some of you, I have decided to go back to the beginning and give some extended time to applying the various Words. The Ten Commandments are so deeply foundational for us as a body to understand who God is, what his nature and position demand, how we fall short, and how desperately we need the gospel concerning Jesus Christ. Therefore, we will give time to reflect more thoroughly and faithfully with each of these Words.

My hope today is that we will see Yahweh’s exalted status, recognize our sustained failure to give him the glory he is due, and embrace that “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom 10:4). We will consider more the lasting significance of the first of the Ten Words. Follow along as I read Deuteronomy 5:6–10.

Idolatry Is a Heart Issue

Our god is whatever we prize or praise most. Idolatry appears anytime we allow our souls to trust or treasure anything separate from God. When thinking of idolatry, most of us likely picture hand-crafted images of worship. As Isaiah says of one who cuts down a tree: “He takes 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” (Isa 44:15). Yet while idolatry can show itself externally, at its core it remains a delusion of the heart. As Isaiah also says in the same context,

They know not, nor do they discern, for [God] has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire.... And I shall make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” He feeds on ashes: a deluded heart has led him astray. (44:18, 20).

Similarly, Ezekiel says, “These men have taken their idols into their hearts and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces” (Ezek 14:1). These passages clarify that idolatry is apparent whenever the heart fails to honor God as God. The material image is only an expression of the heart’s disorder; idolatry doesn’t require the physical idol but is present any time we supplant God’s rightful place in our affections and trust.

Every human heart has a hole that can only properly be filled by the living God. John Calvin rightly noted how the human heart is “a perpetual forge of idols” (*Institutes* 1.11.45); the heart’s an idol factory, constantly moving us to trust or treasure rival gods that can’t supply lasting salvation or satisfaction. Why are we so prone toward idolatry? I see several reasons in Scripture, and we are going to look at three today.

Attraction 1: Tangibility— *Idolatry Focuses on What We Can See*

Paul asserts that Christians “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7; cf. 4:18; John 20:29), yet the human soul is prone to measure strength, worth, and wisdom by what is tangible—what our eyes see and our hands touch. Idolatry is, by nature, both visibly and physically tangible and thus guaranteed. You hold the figurine; you trust the bank account ledger; you lean on your degrees, title, or experience; you flaunt your appearance, your connections, or your stuff. When we trust or treasure such things instead of God, we engage in idolatry.

If you’ve ever prayed yet God seems distant, you know why trusting in things of earth is so attractive. Anxiety so often leads to idolatry. Israel feared their external enemies and wanted “a king to judge [them] like all the nations” (8:5). So, Yahweh declared, “They have rejected me from being king over them” (8:7). Israel wanted a king not to represent Yahweh but to replace him, and this was idolatry. This is why in the very next verse, God said, “According to all the deeds that they have done, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt even to this day, forsaking me and *serving other gods*, so they are also doing to you” (8:8).

Scripture declares, “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes” (Ps 118:9) because “there is no salvation” in mere humans (146:3). It also says, “Cursed is the man who trust in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD” (Jer 17:5). Yet “the heart is deceitful above all things” (17:9), and how easily we are led astray. Even Samuel had to be told, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). Whether in people or prosperity, we so quickly shape idols, reorienting our hearts no longer to have God in first place. Don’t be like those who “trust in their wealth

and boast of the abundance of their riches” (Ps 49:6), for riches are uncertain and God is he who gives and takes them away (1 Tim 6:16; cf. Job 2:21; Acts 17:25).

Idols are impotent, worthless nothings (Isa 41:24, 29; 44:20; Jer 10:14–15; 1 Cor 8:4), controlled by demons and holding no ultimate power (Deut 32:17; 1 Cor 10:19–20). In contrast, Yahweh is Spirit and incomparable to all he has made (Deut 4:12, 15–19; Isa 40:18–26; John 4:24). He created and creates all things and therefore knows all, guides all, and is present and active in all (Gen 1:1; Isa 45:7; Dan 2:21; Heb 1:3; Acts 17:24–28).¹ He alone can save and will work for those who wait for him (Isa 40:30–31; 43:11; 45:21; 64:4; cf. Rom 8:31–32). Put no trust in what cannot eternally provide and protect; instead, hope in God, for “everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (10:11; cf. Isa 49:23).

Attraction 2: Pride— *Idolatry Exalts Self-Righteousness*

Matching our proneness to trust in the tangibility of stuff is our disposition to trust in self even to the point of entitlement. This, too, is idolatry. Yahweh declares, “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me” (Jer 9:23–24). Our God “delights not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, in those who hope in his steadfast love” (Ps 147:10–11). “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.... Blessed is he who trusts in the LORD” (Prov 16:18, 20).

The Lord had disclosed amazing glories to Paul. He notes, “To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited” (2 Cor 12:7). Three times Paul pled for God to take away this trial, but he was told, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:8–9). Therefore, Paul says, “I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:9–10).

Weakness is the Christian way. Yet often we fight against God’s providence, believing that God’s presence, ways, purposes, or timing are not good and that we deserve better. We are entitled to a trial-free life because we somehow have earned it. We may not verbalize it this way, but our inner convictions become apparent

¹ Cf. Exod 4:11; Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6–8; Jer 10:11–13; Isa 42:5; 44:24; 46:9–10; 48:12–13; Rom 11:36; Eph 1:11; 4:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:3.

when struggle or loss arouses sinful anger or frustration toward God or others. We begin to treat our health and our wealth as a wage earned rather than as a gift. God calls this spiritual adultery and prostitution. He confronted Israel: “I will lay waist her vines and her fig trees, of which she said, ‘These are my wages which my lovers[, the false gods,] have given me’” (Hos 2:12). And again, “Rejoice not, O Israel! ... For you have played the whore, forsaking you God. You have loved a prostitute’s wages on all threshing floors” (9:1). Finally, “All her carved images shall be beaten to pieces, all her wages shall be burned with fire, and all her idols I will lay waste, for from the fee of a prostitute she gathered them, and to the fee of a prostitute they shall return” (Mic 1:7).

We must never live with a sense of entitlement, for all divine favor is a gift received and not a wage earned (Rom 4:4; 1 Cor 4:7). And “if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (11:6). True worship of the living God excludes self-exalting boasts (Eph 2:9; Jas 4:16) and embraces weakness as a means to God-dependence.

When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he had already been converted for over two decades. By this time in his Christian life he has already written Galatians, 1–2 Thessalonians, Romans, and likely 1 Corinthians. Here is an apostle of God, who had something to boast about—right? Yet this great missionary writes in verses 8–9: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” Paul attributes a divine purpose to his suffering. “But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God.” Twenty years of sanctification, and Paul says that God still almost had to kill him to weed out his self-reliance!

God hates idolatry seen in pride and entitlement, and he loves us enough to pursue us to see it eradicated, no matter the cost. May we be a people who embrace weakness and depend on God, not on ourselves.

Attraction 3: Covetousness— *Idolatry Treats Gain in This Life as an End*

Every human in his fallen state bears an unsatiable lust for more—more stuff, more prestige, more influence. The preacher in Ecclesiastes declared, “All things are full of weariness; ... the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing” (Eccl 1:8; cf. 4:8; Prov 27:20). Idolatry often manifests itself as discontentment. We again fight against God’s providence, in this instance declaring that God’s presence, ways, purposes, or timing are not enough. Thus, Paul can urge, “Put to death ... what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity,

passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming” (Col 3:5; cf. Eph 5:5). Did you get that? Covetousness is idolatry. This highlights further that idolatry is a heart issue, and it also means that the first and last Word of the Ten refer to idolatry.

Jesus exhorts, “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” He then adds, “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt 6:19–21, 24). That final phrase is intriguing, because Yahweh’s charge in Deuteronomy 5:9 in relation to other gods is, “You shall not bow down to them or *serve* them.” What does it mean to “serve” money? Money is inanimate; it’s not giving us commands to obey. So how do we serve it? We serve it when we treat it as an end and not a means, as a goal and not a tool. We serve money when we allow gaining it to be our passion, and when we see it as what will satisfy and meet our longings. Similarly, we serve God when we treat him as an end and not a means, when we view him as gain, and when we look to him to satisfy and meet our needs. Immediately after Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and money,” he declares, “Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life ... saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ... Your heavenly father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt 6:25, 31–33).

Some of us were present a month ago during our Wednesday night class when John Piper unpacked for us the significance of James 4 where even those praying to God are shown to be idolaters. “You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.... You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. *You adulteresses!* Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (Jas 4:2–4, adapted ESV). James says that when we ask God for our own ends and not his glory, we engage in spiritual adultery.

The writer of Hebrews says, “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’” (Heb 13:5–6). Our god is what we trust or treasure most, so if our desire for other things leads us to a heart of discontentment and covetousness, we are engaging in idolatry.

Similarly, Paul highlights:

Godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. (1 Tim 6:6–10).

Ensuring that our love is not in money or stuff does not mean we don't delight in things of earth. Paul notes in the same letter that it is false teachers guided by demons "who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth." He then adds, "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim 4:1–5). Later, he does not tell the rich that they must stop being rich but instead warns them:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life. (1 Tim 6:17–19)

Paul cautions not against riches but against the "desire to be rich" (6:9), against pride, and against hoping in riches (6:17). The apostle even has a category where generously contributing to the church's mission can actually be a spiritual gift that works for the benefit of the body as a whole (Rom 12:8). Yet he still warns that each person must "not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment" (12:3).

Guard your hearts from covetousness, for it will only bring many pangs. Idolatry is foolish and ultimately of no true profit (Jer 2:11–13; Isa 44:9; Rom 1:22–23), for false gods (Jer 10:11) and all earthly goods (Matt 6:19–20; 1 John 2:17) will pass away. Furthermore, true life and eternal satisfaction are found in Christ alone (Ps 16:11; John 6:35; Phil 3:7–8), his ways and his kingdom are our greatest treasure (Matt 13:44–46), and "great gain" comes only through "godliness with contentment" (1 Tim 6:6; cf. Phil 1:20–21).

Conclusion

Yahweh declared, "You shall have no other gods before me.... You shall not bow down to them or serve them." Do you feel your proneness to idolatry? I do!

The Ten Commandments are the foundation of Moses's law, which Paul notes "came to increase the trespass" (5:20; cf. 3:20; 4:15). Indeed, "If it had not been for the law," he says, "I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness" (7:7–8). Because all mere humans "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23; cf. Gal 3:10), "by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God's] sight (Rom 3:20). "But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that ... grace ... might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:20–21; cf. Gal 3:19). "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! ... For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us" (7:25; 8:3–4). " (7:25). "The power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57; cf. Rom 7:25). As you struggle in your battle against idolatry, fall toward the cross. Rest in Jesus, claim the righteousness he secures, and hope in the power of the gospel to help you love the living Lord with your all.

Comment on “American Idol.”

We Become Like What We Worship

Verses 6–10 hang together addressing proper Worldview and Worship. Moses communicates Word 1 by a single main command and then two explanatory prohibitions. Yahweh declares in verse 6, “You shall have no other gods before me,” and then he clarifies in verses 7 and 8: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image” and “You shall not bow down to them or serve them.” Yahweh is here charging that people must never allow their worldview to include any god but him; he then highlights that he will have no misrepresentation or rivals because he is rightly, necessarily, and lovingly jealous for his people’s love.

This first of the Ten Words confronts the human tendency to “exchange the glory of the immortal God for images” (Rom 1:23). As mere humans, we so quickly manufacture gods in the likeness of creation rather than look at ourselves as those made in God’s image and be pointed back to the God over all who is all-good and all-powerful and all-for us if we have embraced his Son.

When Yahweh confronts idolatry in this first of the Ten Words, he is speaking in love for he knows we will become like what we worship, so if we go after emptiness we will become empty. Psalm 115:4–8 says of the nations:

Their idols are silver and gold,
the work of human hands.
They have mouths, but do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell.
They have hands, but do not feel;
feet, but do not walk;
and they do not make a sound in their throat.
Those who make them become like them;
so do all who trust in them.

Speaking of Israel, the author of Kings reflects, “They went after false idols and become false” (2 Kgs 17:15). And again, Hosea declares, “[They] became detestable like the things they loved” (Hos 9:10). We become like what we worship. What you revere, you will resemble, whether for restoration or ruin. What do you trust, and what do you treasure? If you go after worthlessness, then you will become worthless (Jer 2:5; cf. Ezek 22:31). Do you know what that is like?

Attraction 4: Idolatry Is Easy and Convenient Worship without Covenant Obligations

In the context of declaring how some “knew God” but “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him” but “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images” (Rom 1:21, 23), Paul notes:

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (1:29–32; cf. 2 Tim 3:1–5)

Idolatry is the easy, destructive path, for it leads one to think he is free from the responsibility of surrender to the King of the universe. In idolatry we become our own Lord, shaping our own definitions of right and wrong, good and evil. But such is only a foolish delusion for “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” that he is God alone (Rom 1:18).

Joshua asserted, “Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh 24:15). Similarly, Elijah said, “If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kgs 18:21). Jesus urges his followers, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). He then notes how such a lifestyle is not just hard; it is impossible (19:26; cf. Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14), apart from the gracious work of God through Christ by his Spirit (Matt 19:26; cf. Phil 2:12–13).²

Jesus notes, “The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter it are many.” However, “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matt 7:13–14). “Many who are first will be last, and the last first” (19:30). Indeed, “whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (20:26), following in his path as he “came not to be served but to serve” (20:28; cf. Phil 2:4–8). “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24).

Add convenient with easy

² Cf. Ezek 36:26–27; 1 Cor 15:10; Col 1:28–29.

1. *Convenient*. Do you ever find that following God gets in the way of your own agenda? While frequent and generous offerings were expected, such “worship” of idols could be performed whenever and wherever one so chose—“on every hill and under every green tree” (1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 17:10). But true worship of Yahweh demanded that Israel value Yahweh over self, regardless of the cost. They were to destroy pagan shrines and gather three times annually for community worship at his central sanctuary (Deut 12:2–14; cf. 16:16). They were to aid rather than ignore a neighbor suffering loss or an accident (22:1–4), and they needed to ensure that they abided by the other detailed prescriptions of the sacred calendar and covenant instructions. They were not their own; they had been bought with a price (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Today, holy, pleasing, and acceptable worship is found when we continually present ourselves spiritually as living sacrifices, proclaiming God’s excellencies, abstaining from fleshly passions, living honorably, doing good, and sharing what we have (Rom 12:1; Heb 13:15–16; 1 Pet 2:5, 9, 11–12). At times, this requires great cost through toil and hardship for the good others (Luke 14:26–28; 2 Cor 12:10), and this God-dependent and God-exalting lifestyle is not always convenient. Nevertheless, it is right, good, and necessary and the only path to life (Matt 16:24–25).
2. *Normal*. Are you ever prone to follow the crowd and give in to peer pressure, even when you know the majority is wrong? Idolatry was *the* normal way of life in the ancient world and stood in direct contrast to the counter-cultural biblical view there was a single God over all, who redeemed a people for relationship (Deut 4:32–40). Three features characterized most ancient idolatry: (1) *polytheism* (many gods) (2 Kgs 17:16; Zeph 1:4); (2) *syncretism* (blending worldviews) (2 Kgs 17:33; Zeph 1:5); (3) *pantheism* (God and the universe are one) (Jer 8:2; Zeph 1:5). Yet what the culture declares as normal is often not right, for “*many* walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18; cf. Matt 7:13–14) and most people are spiritually dead, following the devil and unable to accept God’s ways (Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14; Eph 2:1–3). Contrary to *polytheism*, Christians must affirm in word and deed “‘that an idol is nothing in the world,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’”—indeed, “one God, the Father, ... and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 8:4, 6; cf. Deut 32:39; Isa 45:21–22). Against *syncretism*, “no one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24). One is either free from condemnation and empowered by God’s Spirit to obey as a child of God or he is condemned and living according to the flesh as a child of the devil (John 3:18; Rom 8:13; 1 John 3:10). Finally, in contrast to *pantheism*, Yahweh God is eternally and wholly distinct from his creation yet sovereign over it (Gen 1:1; Isa 45:7; Heb 1:3;

Acts 17:24–28), and humans uniquely bear the capacity and calling to display God’s glory as those made in his image (Gen 1:26–28; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10).

3. *Logical*. When you are sick, would you rather see a specialist or a general practitioner? Ancient peoples believed that most gods of the nations specialized in aspects of the world or nature.³ For example, Baal of Canaan was the young weather god (Judg 2:11, 13); Ashtoreth his consort, the mother goddess of love and fertility (2:13); Chemosh of Moab, the god of war (11:24); and Dagon of Philistia, the god of grain (16:23). Other gods controlled life, death, light, evil, water, etc. Such specialization made it logical for people to seek “expert” help rather than go to Yahweh, who had to manage all spheres of life. In our day, you may find it easier to act without prayer, to look to “the experts” over God’s Word, or to follow the culture’s priorities and scheduling patterns instead of God’s values and instructions. Yet Yahweh alone sits on the throne of the universe (Deut 4:35, 39; 32:39), and he called his people to let this truth inform all their lives (5:7; 6:4–5). From him, through him, and to him are *all* things (Rom 11:36; cf. Eph 1:11). While knowing God’s eternal power and divine nature, humans quickly suppress the truth, dishonoring God, not giving him thanks, and even approving of others who turn from him (Rom 1:18–21, 32). Exchanging the glory of God for idols (1:23), they are darkened (Eph 4:17–18) and “stupid,” becoming “worthless” like what they worship (Jer 10:14–15; cf. 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; Ps 115:8). “This world’s wisdom is folly with God” (1 Cor 3:19), promoting “confusion and every base practice,” whereas God’s wisdom “is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, sincere” (Jas 3:16–17).
4. *Sensuous*. How often are you ever tempted to turn away from God to satisfy ungodly desires? Sexual immorality and impurity of all sorts abounds all around us, and to embrace such practices in any way is to engage in idolatry. Focused on what is earthly, idolatry gratifies the physical senses and fleshly desires. In Scripture, it included bowing down and kissing idols (1 Kgs

³ They also distinguished personal, family, and national gods, the latter of whom bore limited geographical sovereignty (see 1 Kgs 20:23, 28; 2 Kgs 5:15, 17; Jon 1:3). While all Israelites would have affirmed Yahweh as their national god (because he created the nation and redeemed them from Egypt), many did not hesitate to pay homage to other deities in family or personal worship. Zephaniah, thus, pointed to those who “swear to Yahweh but *by* their king [e.g., Baal]” (Zeph 1:5). On the three categories of gods, see H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and Thorkild Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, Pelican Books A198 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1951), 22, 87, 107, 123, 128–29, 218–33; Karel van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria, and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life*, SHCANE 7 (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

19:18), visual (often pornographic) images and smells (Ezek 8:10–12),⁴ cutting the body, loud cries, and weeping (1 Kgs 18:28; Ezek 8:14), heavy feasting and drunkenness (Amos 2:8; Acts 15:20–21; 21:25; 1 Cor 8:4–13); and immoral sex (see the close association in Acts 15:20; Eph 5:5; Col 3:5). Some even thought engaging in temple prostitution would obligate the gods to generate fertility on earth (e.g., Amos 2:7–8; Mic 1:7). Yet in Zephaniah’s day, King Josiah destroyed the houses of “the male cult prostitutes who were in Yahweh’s house [i.e., the temple]” (2 Kgs 23:7).⁵ Such was the proper response, since Moses forbade cult prostitution (Deut 23:17) and Yahweh declares such idolatrous acts “abominations” against which he “will act in wrath” (Ezek 8:17–18). Similarly, Paul stressed that those who live “in the passions of the flesh” are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3; cf. 1 John 3:16). However, God’s saving grace trains believers so that, “having denied ungodliness and worldly passions, we may live sensibly and righteously and godly in the present age” (Tit 2:12). We must, therefore, “make no provision for the flesh” (Rom 13:14), while still celebrating God’s good gifts in their proper context and measure (1 Tim 4:4–5). Ever remember that “neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men practicing homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor abusers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10). Then revel in the fact that, though “such were some of you,” “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (6:11).

Conclusion: Flee Idolatry!

John urged his fellow believers, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21), and he also warned that idolaters will end up “in the lake burning with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Rev 21:8). Idolatry will result in ruin. Zephaniah opens his oracle warning against such evil, urging his listeners to embrace Yahweh’s supremacy over all things and to seek and inquire of him (Zeph 1:4–6). May we be among the remnant who heeds his voice.

⁴ The sexually explicit nature of ancient depictions of gods and their emblems (whether in idols or reliefs) is well attested throughout the ancient Near East. For some graphic examples of images of which viewers should use caution, see James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 160–91.

⁵ Cf. 1 Kgs 14:24; Job 36:14; Jer 5:7; Ezek 23.

With such a perspective, Paul asserts, “Put to death ... what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5). James says something similar: “You covet and cannot obtain.... You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. You adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (Jas 4:3–4).

We approach God in prayer as if he is our heavenly butler, asking wrongly “to spend it on [our] passions” (Jas 4:3).

1.

When Adam and Eve rejected their calling to take dominion and followed the voice of the serpent rather than heeding the voice of God, they elevated someone other than God as supreme and engaged in a false worship that brought death and destruction to the universe to this very day. What we value most has become our god, regardless of our profession, and if we set our hope on anyone or anything other than the true Lord, we are engaging in idolatry.

The prophet Ezekiel highlights how idolatry is far . After receiving the Ten Commandments out of the fire, cloud, and thick darkness, Israel took less than a month shape the golden calf and to doubt Yahweh’s presence and favor. We may be prone to say, “How could Israel do such a thing?” Yet how quickly do we shape idols of the heart, pursuing

Words 1–3 in the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). Discussions with some of you have moved me to expand my reflections on the relevance of these Words for today. You’ll recall that

For Word 2: How do we bear Yahweh's name in truth rather than in falsehood? And for Word 3: Does the Sabbath command obligate Christians to pursue rhythms of work and rest today?