

## **CONFRONTING IDOLATRY, PART 2**

### **Applying Commandment 1 in Deut 5:6–10**

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This spring *American Idol* premieres for its 24<sup>th</sup> season, as three music icons serve as judges in a quest for new vocal talent. TV shows rarely declare so blatantly our culture's idolatry, but there it is in all its glitz and glamour. Certainly, one can celebrate the skill of a strong and brilliant voice without committing idolatry, but our world quickly elevates power, prestige, position, and pomp to the level of ungodly praise, making sports figures, musical artists, and Hollywood stars into true idols. We treat as gods whatever we value most, and too often we value the created over the Creator, thus minimizing our joy and moving us toward destruction. Follow along as I read Deuteronomy 5:6–10.... Pray with me....

### **We Become Like What We Worship**

This is our second sermon that applies through Christ the first of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5—the prohibition against trusting, shaping, and serving false gods. A sermon fully devoted to application is not my normal practice, but the significance of God's centrality in Deuteronomy calls for it. Deuteronomy 5:6–10 addresses proper Worldview and Worship by supplying a single main command followed by two explanatory prohibitions. Yahweh asserts 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.” A proper worldview stresses that Yahweh is the only supreme being and is, therefore, rightly, necessarily, and lovingly jealous that we worship only him and not misrepresent him or elevate rivals.

This first of the Ten Words confronts the human tendency to “exchange the glory of the immortal God for images” (Rom 1:23). When Yahweh confronts idolatry, he is speaking in love for he knows we will become like what we worship. 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.

If you go after worthlessness, you will become worthless (Jer 2:5; cf. Ezek 22:31). As said of Israel, “They went after false idols and became false” (2 Kgs 17:15). “[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 we go after emptiness, we will become empty. Do you know what that is like—to turn from the living God’s ways and to find your soul whither? In Word One of the Ten Commandments, Yahweh is calling us away from idolatry for our good.

Last time, we considered three reasons why idolatry is attractive to our human hearts: (1) Idolatry is *tangible*, focusing on what we can see. (2) Idolatry is *self-righteous*, promoting pride. (3) Idolatry is *covetous*, treating gain in this life as an end. Today we are going to consider four more attractions to idolatry. Idolatry is (4) *easy*, (5) *normal*, (6) *logical*, and (7) *sensuous*.

#### **Attraction 4: Easy—**

#### ***Idolatry Is Undemanding and Convenient without Covenant Obligations***

Yahweh told the exodus generation, “You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes” (Lev 18:3). In Deuteronomy, Moses clarifies that no other nation on earth had “statutes and rules so righteous” as all Yahweh’s law (Deut 4:8). By removing covenant obligations, idolatry resulted in people doing “abominable practices ... for their gods” (20:18), working evil “on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree” (12:2; cf. 1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 17:10).

Idolatry is the easy way, characterized by lack of self-control and weakness rather than strength, for when temptations rise, idolatry lets us give in without a fight. Jesus notes, “The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction,” but “the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life” (Matt 7:13–14). Idolatry’s path is simple; we worship however and whatever we want, defining for ourselves what is right and wrong, good and evil. In idolatry we do not value God as King or value his image in others.

When declaring how some “knew God” but “did not honor him as God” 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)

Yet such actions are foolish 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 charged, “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). Every day we decide whether we will “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33) or follow a different path. Guarding our hearts and our eyes for Jesus’s sake is not the easy way, for it demands that, with God’s help, we deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow him (Matt 16:24; cf. 19:26). In our interactions it means that we will emulate the one who “came not to be served but to serve” (20:26–28; cf. Phil 2:4–8).

The old covenant required that Israel destroy pagan shrines (Deut 7:5; 12:3; cf. 16:21–22) and heed the sacred calendar, including gathering three times annually for community worship at Yahweh’s central sanctuary (12:2–14; cf. 16:16). The people were to love their neighbor (Lev 19:18), execute justice for the weak (Deut 10:18–19), work for righteousness always (16:22), and aid rather than ignore a neighbor suffering loss or an accident (22:1–4). They were not their own; they had been bought with a price through the exodus.

In the new covenant, those purchased through Christ’s blood (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; cf. 1 Pet 1:18–19) continue to maintain order in our corporate gatherings (1 Cor 14:40), and we bring holy, pleasing, and acceptable worship by continually presenting ourselves spiritually as living sacrifices. We do this by 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). In contrast to idolatry, true discipleship and faithfulness often require toil and hardship for the good others (Luke 14:26–28; 2 Cor 12:10). Yet the rewards of the hard way are great, including eternal life ([Matt 16:25–27](#); [Mark 10:29–30](#)).

### **Attraction 5: Normal— *Idolatry Is the Common Way of Worldliness***

In Deuteronomy, Yahweh regards idols as abominations (27:15) and counts idolaters as forgetting the covenant (4:23), acting corruptly (4:16, 25), and deserving curse (27:15). He, therefore, pleads with Israel: “You shall not go after other gods, the gods of the peoples who are around you—for the LORD your God in your midst is a jealous God—lest the anger of the LORD your God be kindled against you, and he destroy you from off the face of the earth” (6:14–15; cf. 7:4–5; 8:19–20; 11:16–17; 30:17–18; 31:18). Like today, idolatry was *the* normal way of life in the ancient world, and it constantly drew Israel away from the belief that Yahweh their redeemer was alone God (4:32–40). If you are ever prone to follow

the crowd and give in to peer pressure, even when you know the majority is wrong, you recognize how attractive idolatry is.

Paul defines “the course of this world” when he notes: “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:1–3; cf. Rom 8:7; 1 Cor 2:14). When Jesus says, “The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction,” he adds, “those who enter by it are *many*” (Matt 7:13–14). Indeed, “*many* walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil 3:18).

Throughout history, idolatry has included three common features: (1) *polytheism*—the embrace of many gods (2 Kgs 17:16; Zeph 1:4); (2) *syncretism*—the blending of worldviews (2 Kgs 17:29–33; Zeph 1:5); and (3) *pantheism*—the belief that nature is divine (Jer 8:2; Zeph 1:5). Yet against *polytheism*, Christians must affirm in word and deed “‘that an idol is nothing in the world,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’”—“one God, the Father, . . . and one Lord, Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 8:4, 6; cf. Deut 32:39; Isa 45:21–22). Jesus alone is “the way and the truth and the life,” and “no one comes to the Father except through [him]” (John 14:6). Contrary to *syncretism*, “no one can serve two masters” (Matt 6:24). Either God has declared that you have no condemnation and empowered you to live as his child, or you remain condemned and live according to the flesh as a child of the devil (John 3:18; Rom 8:13; 1 John 3:10). Moses urges, “Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them” (Deut 11:16). Paul too warns, “Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9–10). Syncretism leads to death. Finally, against *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). The idolatry that is normal for the world should not be normal for Christians. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor 5:17).

### **Attraction 6: Logical— *Idolatry Makes Sense within Its False Worldview***

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. For example, Baal of Canaan was the young weather god (Judg 2:11, 13); Ashtoreth his consort was the mother goddess of love and fertility (2:13); Chemosh of Moab was the god of war (11:24); and Dagon of

Philistia was 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.

Nevertheless, the Bible’s testimony is that God in Christ makes and guides all things and is the only source of lasting help. He holds life and death: “See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no God beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand” (Deut 32:39). He controls all disease and disability. “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?” (Exod 4:11). He decrees every storm and natural disaster. “He makes his wind blow and the waters flow.... Fire and hail, snow and mist; stormy wind fulfilling his word!” (Ps 147:18; 148:8). As the great hymnist Isaac Watts wrote in verse 3 of “I Sing the Mighty Power of God”: “There’s not a plant or flower below but makes your glories known; and clouds arise and tempests blow by order from your throne.”

Yahweh also declares, “I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these” (Isa 45:7). God alone “changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning” (Dan 2:21). “He works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph 1:11), and this even includes human sins, which he permits and guides for his ultimate good ends. Of Israel’s enemies we read, “It was the LORD’s doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed” (Josh 11:20). “The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble” (Prov 16:4). “They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do” (1 Pet 2:8). God opposes all forms of unjust killing, declaring, “You shall not murder” (Exod 20:13); nevertheless, he ordained the very death of his Son: “For truly in this city there were gathered against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27–28).

In view of God’s vast and dreadful greatness, “it is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man” (Ps 118:8). As Yahweh declares, “I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior” (Isa 43:11). Yet when the bills pile up or sickness strikes or tensions rise in the relationship, we can be so prone toward idolatry, looking for help from so many other places than God. This should not be.

The news of our day urges us to heed the “experts,” who claim to know better than parents what kids need, what kids should read and be taught, and what kids should believe. I recall in our adoption journey how the “experts” declared

how the process for disciplining troubled kids falls outside the guidelines given in the Bible, as if the Scriptures were written only for “stable families” with kids who never experienced trauma, loss, or pain. The “experts” of our day say all sorts of things about abortion, education, politics, gambling, sexual morality, business ethics, and the like that explicitly counter the clear teaching of God’s Word. Yet Christians are a people of the Book, guided and governed in all things by the teachings of Scripture. Let us take comfort in Jesus’s prayer for us, where he says, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:15–17).

What must guide the church are the values and instructions in God’s unchanging Word. Yahweh sits on the throne of the universe (Deut 4:35, 39; 32:39)—a truth that should inform all our lives (5:7; 6:4–5). “You shall have no other gods before me” (Deut 5:7), for 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 God’s glory 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). Paul declares, “This world’s wisdom is folly with God” (1 Cor 3:19). James adds that it promotes “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).

Those who follow “the course of this world” are “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience” (Eph 2:2). “All that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:16–17). While idolatry may be logical in a world absent of the true God, may we, knowing he exists, “abhor what is evil” and “hold fast to what is good” (Rom 12:9), always placing his truth above the voice of worldly “experts.”

### **Attraction 7: Sensuous— *Idolatry Appeals to the Senses in Ungodly Ways***

Focused on what is earthly, idolatry gratifies the physical senses and fleshly desires, working with what is sensuous and often moving into what is sensual. In Scripture, idolatrous worship included smells and visual (often pornographic) images (Ezek 8:10–12), bowing before and kissing idols (1 Kgs 19:18), 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 that going to the temple of the god of fertility and engaging in temple prostitution would obligate the gods to generate fertility on earth (e.g., Amos 2:7–8; Mic 1:7).

Righteous King Josiah destroyed the houses of “the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the LORD” (2 Kgs 23:7; cf. 1 Kgs 14:24; Job 36:14; Jer 5:7; Ezek 23). 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; cf. Deut 6:14–15).

Sexual immorality and impurity of all sorts abound around us. Immodesty and the perversion of creation norms catch us at nearly every turn. You usually can’t watch football or go through the checkout lane without facing it. The world is filled with idolatry—different gods and alternative lords vying for our allegiance. Those who live “in the passions of the flesh” are “by nature children of wrath” (Eph 2:3; cf. 1 John 3:16). Yet 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, author’s translation). May we “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). May we 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 may we revel 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 ends his first epistle saying: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). His conclusion to Revelation clarifies why—idolaters will end up “in the lake burning with fire and sulfur” (Rev 21:8). Idolatry is attractive because it is tangible, self-righteous, covetous, easy, normal, logical, and sensuous. Yet regarding other gods, Yahweh declares, “You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Deut 5:9), and Jesus says, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matt 6:33). Our God remains justly, necessarily, and lovingly jealous for our love, and the prohibition against idolatry remains in the new covenant because God in Christ remains the only one worthy of our worship. We must not misrepresent God or elevate rivals to him. I am praying that Sovereign Joy Baptist Church will be known as a people that flees idolatry because we value God and treasure Christ above all! God declares, “You shall have no other gods before me” (5:7), for his glory and our good. Let us pray....