

How Should We Respond to Idolatry?

Exodus 32:15–23, Acts 17:16–21

Last week we considered Paul’s ministry in Thessalonica. We saw how the new converts in Thessalonica were exemplary because “they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” May we likewise receive the word of God with all readiness and search the Scriptures diligently to learn God’s truth accurately. God’s truth is beautiful, like a multifaceted gem, each face contributing to the beauty of the whole. May each of us desire to know God’s truth and live it!

Paul’s pointed preaching of the truth was often met by opposition, as the enemy of our souls does not want people to hear the truth! In Philippi the silversmiths who made their living selling images of the goddess Artemis dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities; the evangelists were stripped naked, beaten with rods and imprisoned. In Thessalonica the unbelieving Jews gathered a mob and assaulted the house of Jason, one of Paul’s converts. Paul and Silas were forced to flee from Thessalonica and begin a new mission in Berea, a smaller city fifty miles away. But the unbelieving Jews from Thessalonica followed them to Berea, bent on stirring up trouble there. Silas and Timothy stayed in Berea to continue to work with the new converts there, but thought it wise to send Paul away, as he was the magnet for opposition.

Our text today begins with Paul in Athens, waiting for Silas and Timothy to join him. While he waited, he considered the spiritual condition of the city and the best method of reaching its people. A good evangelist needs to know two things. He needs to know the gospel accurately, inside and out. But he also needs to know the people he is ministering to—their background, their worldview, their openness to the gospel. The need of all people everywhere is the *gospel*, the truth about Christ and his salvation. There is only one Savior, only one way of salvation. All people everywhere need to hear the gospel and need to have their hearts opened up to the truth of Christ. The need for the gospel is universal. But the best and most effective way to present it may differ depending on the target audience. As Paul pondered the most effective way to preach to the Athenians, he observed their religious landscape. Paul was in the city of Athens. Athens today is the capital of Greece, a city of four million people. But it was much smaller in Paul’s time. Consider some helpful background from the *Expositors Bible Commentary*.

Said to have been founded by Theseus, the hero of Attica who slew the Minotaur [a mythical creature that was half man and half bull] and conquered the Amazons, Athens was named in honor of the goddess Athena. The city reached its zenith under Pericles (495–429 B.C.); and during his life, the Parthenon, numerous temples, and other splendid buildings were built. Literature, philosophy, science and rhetoric flourished; and Athens attracted intellectuals from all over the world.

Politically it became a democracy. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) put an end to the greatness of Athens. Culturally and intellectually, however, it remained supreme for centuries, with such figures as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Zeno living there. The Romans conquered Athens in 146 B.C. They were lovers of everything Greek, and under their rule Athens continued as the cultural and intellectual center of the world. Rome also left the city free politically to carry on her own institutions as a free city within the empire. When Paul came to Athens, it had long since lost its empire and wealth. Its population probably numbered no more than ten thousand. Yet it had a glorious past on which it continued to live. Its temples and statuary were related to the worship of the Greek pantheon, and its culture was pagan.

Here was a city that was named after a mythical goddess. It had an abundance of heathen temples dedicated to gods and goddesses that do not exist, that have never existed, and are wholly the product of human imagination. The devotees of these gods and goddesses are lost, without the truth, and will perish eternally unless they are reached with the gospel.

As a Jew, Paul found the idea of idolatry abhorrent. The religion of the Bible is monotheistic, that is, centered on the one true God. But the nation of Israel was surrounded by polytheists—worshippers of many gods, such as Baal, Asherah, Dagon, Rimmon, Ishtar, Tammuz, etc. The difference between the God of Israel and the gods of the nations is stark; it is the difference between truth and error, existence and non-existence. The God of the Bible is the true God, the only God that is. The so-called gods of all the other world religions do not actually exist; they are figments of human imagination; they were made up in the mind of man. The fact that many people believe in them does not make them true. Idolaters believe a lie, and at the end they will find that their false gods cannot save, cannot take them to heaven. The contrast between the true God and idols is stark. Psalm 95:6 states that “all the gods of the nations are idols: but the LORD made the heavens.” The point of the phrase “the LORD made the heavens” is to affirm that that the LORD Jehovah is the Creator of the universe. The physical world was not made by many creators but by one Creator, the God who spoke all things into existence by his mighty power. This God who *is* is contrasted with the gods of the nations (the word can also be translated “peoples”). The true God made the heavens, but the gods of the nations are idols (Heb. אֱלֹהִים). The root meaning of this word is *worthless, insignificant*, so the English Standard Version translates the word אֱלֹהִים as “*worthless idols*.” The LORD Jehovah, the God who *is*, is the Creator of all things, but the gods of the nations are worthless idols—they don’t even exist.

We like to think the best of other people, and actually, the Bible encourages us to do that. In his famous “love chapter,” 1 Corinthians 13, Paul teaches that love

“thinketh no evil.” We should not assume that other people have evil motives unless there is plain evidence to the contrary. By the same token we do not like to say unkind things about other religions. Many adherents of other religions have good motives, they are good neighbors, they are pleasant to be around. But when the god they worship doesn’t even exist, we do them no favor by failing to confront that unpleasant fact. We need to speak to them lovingly and say, “I know you are sincere in your faith, but I need to tell you that the god you are putting your trust in doesn’t exist, and he cannot save. The true God is the Creator of all things and all people, and this God sent his Son to this earth to save us. You need to put your trust in Christ.” With the flood of immigration that has been taking place the last few years, America is becoming more multicultural. Whereas earlier in our history most Americans were nominal Christians, nowadays we are likely to come into contact with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Many of them are very nice people, but they are idolaters, and they need to hear about Christ. Let us pray for wisdom to tell them the gospel. People who profess *no* religion are also idolaters. They worship the gods of money and pleasure. They too need Christ.

As a conscientious Jew, Paul found idolatry abhorrent. He knew that the first commandment requires us to know and acknowledge God to be the only true God, and our God; and to worship him purely. He knew that the second commandment forbids the worshiping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his word.¹ Throughout its history Israel was continually attracted to heathen idols.

This was Paul’s first trip to Greece. The Greeks recognized twelve major Olympian gods and goddesses such as Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Athena, Ares, Aphrodite, Apollo and Artemis—gods that do not exist. The city of Athens was named in honor of the goddess Athena.

Our New Testament text tells us that Paul’s spirit was “provoked within him” when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Other translations have “greatly distressed,” “greatly upset,” “deeply troubled,” “deeply disturbed.” Paul had been walking around Athens, getting to know the city, wondering how to present the gospel in such an environment. Here was a great city—a center of philosophy and education with worldwide influence—given over to idolatry. There were many people there, blind to the truth, given over to superstition and on the verge of dying without Christ. Clearly, Paul was not emotionless and indifferent. He was greatly distressed, irritated (*παροξύνω*). This is a strong word; it comes into English as *paroxysm*, a sudden, violent emotion. The word is also in 1 Corinthians 13:5, where it says that “love is not easily *provoked*.” When we truly love someone, we want to give him or her the benefit of the doubt. We learn to put up with their shortcomings; we don’t want to make an issue out of things that are of no

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

consequence. Does a spouse leave a cupboard door open or forget to turn out the light when leaving a room? Sometimes it's just better to close the door or turn out the light rather than make an issue out of trifles.

But idolatry is no trifle! It is the difference between life and death, heaven and hell. It needs to be rooted out of our hearts and rooted out of society. The Christian view of idolatry is well-expressed in the hymn “All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above,” which has the line “*All idols underfoot be trod, the Lord is God! the Lord is God! To God all praise and glory!*”² Our Larger Catechism, summarizing Scripture, asserts that one of the duties of the Second Commandment is “the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.”³ One proof text for “disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship” is the first two verses of our Acts text today: “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the Gentile worshipers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.” When Paul saw the rampant idolatry in Athens, he didn’t avert his eyes and pretend he hadn’t seen it; he didn’t look the other way. No! This was a life-and-death matter! Idolaters will perish. The book of Revelation informs us that “*idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.*”⁴ Let that sink in for a minute. Idolaters—if they do not repent and turn to Christ—are on their way to hell! Does not love want to inform them? Later in our chapter Paul will preach his sermon in the Areopagus. He will warn the Athenians that “we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising” (v. 29). The “Divine Nature”—that is, the true God (“the divine being,” ESV; “the Godhead,” KJV), is not in any way of “man’s devising.” Man does not create God; rather, God created man; that is the consistent teaching of Holy Scripture.

So what is the Christian to do? First, he must *care deeply about the God’s honor*. If a wife is dishonored, a loving husband will rise to her defense. If God is dishonored, the Christian ought to rise to his defense. As the metrical Psalm puts it, “All lands, to God in joyful sounds aloft your voices raise; *sing forth the honor of his name*, and glorious make his praise.”⁵ In a sinful world there are many misconceptions about God. Knowing the truth about God is absolutely vital, for believing in the wrong god will not avail. Sincerity gets no one to heaven. A person may be sincere yet sincerely wrong. Sincerity cannot save.

² https://opc.org/hymn.html?hymn_id=25

³ Larger Catechism 108, <https://opc.org/lc.html>

⁴ Rev. 21:8

⁵ https://opc.org/hymn.html?hymn_id=22

When Paul was provoked by the rampant idolatry of Athens, he *confronted* it. He warned the Athenians that it was their duty to repent (v. 30)—that is, change their minds, change their behavior, turn from their idols to the true God. As he would later write in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). We must root idolatry out of our hearts and stop worshiping idols, whether the idol of pleasure or the idol of entertainment or the idol of self. I warn you, if you enthrone *self* over the God of the Bible, if you insist on always doing everything your own way, you are an idolater and will come under God’s condemnation if you do not repent. The Second Commandment requires “the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.” Not only should the Christian disapprove, detest and oppose all false worship, he should also remove all monuments of idolatry according to his place and calling. If he is in a place of authority, he should destroy the false idols that detract from the honor of God. In Deuteronomy 7:5 God commands his people to destroy the nations of Canaan and not intermarry with idolaters. He says, “thus you shall deal with them: you shall *destroy* their altars, and *break down* their sacred pillars, and *cut down* their wooden images, and *burn* their carved images with fire.” God had promised to give the land of Canaan to Israel. Israel was to be totally devoted to God and worship him in purity. Israel was deputized to destroy the nations of Canaan for their idolatry. All the remnants of the Canaanites’ idolatry were to be destroyed, and only the pure worship of God was to remain. Sadly, Israel largely failed in this task and continued to be tempted by the idolatry of the surrounding nations.

The prophet Isaiah tells God’s people, “You will also defile the covering of your images of silver, and the ornament of your molded images of gold. You will throw them away as an unclean thing; you will say to them, ‘Get away!’” (Isa. 30:22).

The technical term for the destruction of idols is *iconoclasm*, defined as “the rejection or destruction of religious images.” The Christian is to remove monuments of idolatry according to his place and calling. “Monument” can mean “an outstanding, enduring and memorable example of something.”⁶ Each of us has the authority and responsibility to rid idolatry from our own personal possessions. Are we addicted to pornography or video games or substances? May God grant us the courage to get rid of these items and dedicate ourselves wholly to him! Will we miss our idols? Perhaps. But his word encourages us: “seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). If we put God first, he will supply us with what we need, whether spiritual,

⁶ *New Oxford American Dictionary*

physical or emotional. To put God in first place is to find perfect contentment and happiness. God himself is our true portion in this life.

Heads of households have the authority and duty to rid their homes and yards of monuments of idolatry, whether images, statues, or other items used in false worship. Business owners have the authority and duty to rid them from their businesses. If the apostle Paul came to our home or business, would his spirit be provoked within him as he saw that we—professing Christians—were given over to idols?

Church have the authority and responsibility to remove monuments of idolatry. Sadly, idolatry affects large swaths of the Christian church. The Eastern Orthodox and Roman churches use images in worship. This is contrary to the Second Commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them.”⁷ The church is not to *make* images or *worship* with images. The apostle John’s first epistle proves conclusively that this commandment remains binding in the New Testament era. As if anticipating the idolatry that would infect the church John ends his epistle with the words “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” Hear it again: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.” The command is broad and unlimited: “keep yourselves from idols”; it doesn’t forbid certain kinds of idols and permit others; it just says, “keep yourselves from idols”—period! But he also appends the word “Amen,” which adds the element of solemnity and calls God to witness the truthfulness of the statement. “Little children, keep yourselves from idols. *Amen.*” But some churchmen are adept at rationalizing their use of images. Make no mistake: the church has authority only to preach and teach the gospel of Christ. It has no authority to set up or promote or sanction images for use in worship.

The Heidelberg Catechism, question 98, asks, “But may not images, as books for the unlearned, be permitted in churches?” The answer is “No, we should not try to be wiser than God. He wants the Christian community instructed by the living preaching of his Word—not by idols that cannot even talk.”⁸ Indeed, we should not try to be wiser than God! “It pleased God by the foolishness of *preaching* to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). What is preaching? It is the proclamation of the message of the Bible, consisting of exposition and application—explaining the meaning of Scripture and applying it to the hearts of men today.

God requires that we love him with all our heart. We should know him in truth, as he is revealed in his word—not a caricature of him in a humanly devised and humanly constructed image. We should be content with God’s revelation of himself

⁷ Ex. 20:4–5

⁸ Heidelberg Catechism 98Q, *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*, 390

in the Bible, which is inspired by God and perfect in all respects (“The law of the LORD is *perfect*, converting the soul,” Ps. 19:7). We should settle for nothing less than the exposition and application of the *Scriptures* in our pulpits.

Symbols have meaning. Andrée Seu Peterson, writing in *World*, refers to a Senegalese player in France’s Paris Saint-Germain soccer league named Idrissa Gueye. When told to wear rainbow colors on the field in support of LGBT identities, he chose to sit out the game. The soccer federation, thinking itself more than reasonable, said he should at least submit to a photo in the promotional uniform. A harmless gesture, right? Gueye’s answer was again, “Non.”⁹

Supporters of the use of images may say that the images are harmless, but God’s word says otherwise. Images detract from the glory of God and distort the God of Scripture. When Paul saw that Athens was given to idolatry, his spirit was provoked within him, and it animated his zeal to preach the gospel. May God likewise give us all a zeal for his truth and a desire to destroy the monuments of idolatry in our own lives. Amen.

⁹ *World*, 7-30-22, p. 70