

To announce that you're going to preach on idolatry,
to a 21st-century Western congregation, full of young people
is to risk being greeted by a great sigh of relief
as everyone nestles down for a snooze!

After all, who here has a small statue of Baal in their living room or
a stack of pet gods lined up in their back garden?
I mean who would do such a thing!

Idolatry, as we all know, is a Stone Age concept.
It is something that archaeologists talk about.
It belongs to the past.
Or so many would believe

The reality is, that Idols are just as much an issue for us today
as they were in Jesus' time, as they were in Moses' time.
And that's part of what I want to show you this evening.
In fact, there are more references in the Bible to idolatry than to any of the other commandments.
So, according to God, this is a pretty important subject

God says, in Deuteronomy Chapter 5
*You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven or on earth or in the sea
You shall not bow down 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,*

but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Well that's pretty serious stuff, it's ancient wisdom and God talks about it constantly,
God says:

- Don't worship idols
- because if you do, it'll not go well with you or your children or your children's children; and
- if you do, you'll miss out on my never ending faithful love to you.

Three ideas:

- 1) Don't create idols
- 2) for it'll not go well for you
- 3) and you'll miss out on experiencing God's love.

So if we're looking for God's blessings in our life today,
if we're looking to avoid the bear-traps of this life, to not screw it up – and indeed, to not screw it up for our
children and our children's children –
then this commandment is real, its relevant and its really important to understand it.

So God says, firstly,

1. Do not create Idols to worship.

Well, there are three steps in creating an Idol.

The first is to identify something which is really important to us.

In Moses' time the people of Canaan needed food –
because starvation, blight, the loss of livestock were really an issue for them
So they created Baal (it means Lord)
Ball was the god of rain, of fertility, of agriculture
They had a real need.

They created a god who would meet that need.

*In Greek times, the city states were constantly skirmishing with each other, and then came along this vast juggernaut of an empire called Persia, destroying everything in its path,
Security was a real issue for them
so they created Ares – the god of war*

*In Egyptian culture, In Aztec culture, in Hindu culture
they had 100s of needs and 100s of wants (sex, fate, wealth, sex, revenge, health, children, sex, rain, rivers,
animals and sex)
and they created a god for each of them*

You want to make an idol?
You begin with a need.

We have needs too.
Our needs are to feel safe, to have good health, to have a place to call home.
Our needs are for fun, happiness, entertainment
We want to belong, be needed, be desired
We are looking for purpose and meaning in life,

we have a whole bunch of needs
so we have all the raw ingredients for our very own personal ‘Idol factory’.

If you want to make an Idol? then
firstly: begin with a need

Secondly: make sacrifices for it.

*In Canaanite and Aztec culture if wanted a good crop then you’d sacrifice children in fire.
You’d burn children, because crops were more important than kids.*

*In Greek culture if you wanted to win a battle – you’d sacrifice the fastest war horse in the city –
because the fight was important than the horse*

*In Roman culture if you wanted sex,
you would give money to Aphrodite’s Temple Prostitutes –
because your pleasure was more important than your money.*

To make an idol, you take a ‘want’ and make sacrifices for it.

Well, we all make sacrifices for the things we want!
we save up our money for the next iGadget to entertain us
we work hard to get a promotion to keep our job
we go into debt to afford a bigger home for our family
we give up time to be a friend
we sacrifice our heart to love someone
we work like slaves to provide for our children.

We all sacrifice different things, all the time, for other things that are important to us.
Now, none of this is bad!
None of this is wrong!
We all sacrifice different things, for other things that are important to us.

But it all goes belly up.
The Idol is finished, erected, polished and has a cherry put on it

When the **thing** that we sacrifice is our relationship with God

The third and final step in “Idols R US” is

3) we sacrifice God for other things which are important to us.

We throw our relationship with God away to keep something else.

That’s when we make an Idol.

For many Christians **Leisure** is an Idol – we like Leisure! we want Leisure time.

But when we play Sport, lie in bed, go out with our mates on a Sunday,
instead of worshipping God that day

we sacrifice our relationship with God to the idol of Leisure

Someone said to me on Thursday,

I’m sorry we didn’t come to church on Sunday we went clothes shopping...

But I know, that they know, that God has done some incredible things in their life, miraculous things even

And they said I’m sorry we didn’t come to church on Sunday we went clothes shopping...

They sacrifice their relationship with God to the idol of Leisure

For many Christians **Relationships** are an Idol.

We can make our **girlfriend** or boyfriend an idol.

When we decide to sleep with them –

even though God says there is a better way, a safer way, a more precious context for sex –

when we decide to sleep with them –

we are putting our relationship with them

in front of our relationship with God

we are sacrificing our relationship with God to the idol of “Intimacy”

We can make our **friends** an Idol.

When their opinion of us is more important to us than God’s opinion,

When we keep quiet about our relationship with God because we are not prepared to risk being ridiculed

They are an Idol.

we are sacrificing our relationship with God to the idol of “being needed”

We can make **money** an Idol.

We can bend the rules to make it, we can fabricate the truth to keep it, we can sacrifice our integrity to get it.

The old story goes of the Oxford Professor who said to one of his students

“would you have sex with me for £10 million.

She thought for a bit and said for £10 million I would.

Then he said “so would you have sex with me for £10”.

“£10” she said “£10 – what do you think I am”.

And he replied. “we have already established what you are –

we’re now just haggling about the price”.

We can sacrifice our relationship with God to get ‘money’

Money can be so important to us that we refuse to even think about tithing instead saying to God everything else gets first dips into our income

and God I’ll give you part of the leftovers.

Its an Idol.

The truth is that people have always sacrificed God for things they want,

they did in Moses’ time (while Moses was up the mountain receiving the 10 Commandments – the people were down in the valley melting their gold ear-rings to create a Golden Calf so that they may party like the Egyptians used to party).

People have always sacrificed God for the things they want

they did in Jesus' time –

They sacrificed God for the things they want...

They wanted a military Messiah

They wanted their own political land

They wanted Jesus to leave them alone

So they sacrificed him.

We do it today...

Whenever we put something in front of God

Whenever we sacrifice "God's ways" for "our ways"

Whenever we say "why should I"

We sacrifice God...we crucify Christ...

But the thing about Idols, says God, is
when you make them

2. They begin to destroy you.

We create idols to serve us - but when we make them we always end up serving them.

God said

Do not worship your Idol;

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 what does it mean?

Because it sounds odd that God would punish "*the children to the third and fourth generation*"?

It means this...

if I get roaring drunk, trip over and break my arm –

then there **is truth** in saying

that 'my falling over and breaking my arm'

is God's punishment for my stupidity

God created the rules which say 'if you act recklessly you risk hurting yourself',

God *could have* rescued me if he wanted to

So if I get roaring drunk and break my arm –

Then you *can* say that: "God is punishing me"

(You can **also** say "I did it to myself, it was my own stupidity!")

Both are true.

If we say 'its God's punishment' then we are just stressing God's Sovereignty over all things

If we say 'it's my fault' we are stressing our own personal Responsibility

Both are correct.

So when God says "I am a jealous God, punishing "*the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me*".

God is stressing his Sovereignty in our life.

He is saying that there are God ordained natural consequences to Sin which travels down generations.

So "if I commit SERIAL adultery – *which by the way has nothing to do with cornflakes*"

then the 'God ordained natural consequences' of that are,

that my wife will probably leave me,

that my children will grow up in a single parent household,

that they will have a damaged view of marriage

that they may therefore not marry themselves so that **their** children are born outside of the security of marriage
and so the consequences cascade down through each generation.

We can all see that the same can happen with Gambling, with Alcohol Addiction, with Child Abuse... you name it
the consequences, the punishment of those things that I choose to do flow down through generations

It is no different with the Idols.

If we set up an Idol, and we ALL have idols
then the consequences of that are far reaching – both for us and our children and our children's children...

2.1 For Idols will always end up Disappointing Us

If we make our girlfriend, or our career, or our money, or our Leisure time as more important than God to us

Then one day they will let us down and we will find they do not deliver what we were looking for;
Look, none of those things are life-proof
everyone of them fades, falls, breaks, decays, dies

Lean on a career and what happens when you are made redundant?
Lean on money what happens when the stock-market crashes?
Lean on a boyfriend or girlfriend – and what happens if the relationship fails?

Lean on anything that is not God and what happens when death or a tragic accident comes calling?

Our Idols, whatever they are, will not save us **in life** and they **cannot** save us in death.
They always, ultimately, disappoint.

2.2 They also Deform Us.

Our idols change us.

If we put **work** in front of God we lose our sense of what life is all about.
There are men in our congregation who will not provide a spiritual lead in their family because work for them has replaced their sense of significance in God.
As a consequence their children see that God is NOT No.1 in their life,
*and **therefore** learn that if he is not NO.1 for my Dad then he cannot be all that important after all.*
And so our life-balance is deformed.

If we put **sex** in front to God it will warp our imagination,
it will lead us into disastrous encounters,
it will change the way we look at women,
it will develop habits which we will find hard to break,
it will create memories that cannot easily be walk away from.
Only a few months ago someone came to see me, distressed that they had had an abortion.
They had made a mistake, they'd let things get out of control, and their pregnancy was unbearable for them and their family –
so they had an abortion and now the guilt is overwhelming and the regret seems inescapable.

If we value **money** because of the stuff it buys, more than God,
it simply makes us more shallow – we become a person who judges ourselves and others by the things we've got
if we value **money** because of the fun we can have, more than God,
it feeds our self-centredness and our world revolves more and more around our likes and dislikes

Our Idols disappoint us, they deform us and they

2.3. Displace God in Us

In the Film "Master and Commander" there is a scene where Russell Crowe proposes a toast. He holds his glass in the air and says with all appropriate seriousness, "To our wives and our sweethearts". All the men go "here, here". Then he says, with a giggle, "may they never meet!"

Our sweethearts – our Idols
the ones we lavish such attention on,
the ones we can't wait to see again,
the ones we spend so much time thinking about,
displace God in our lives.

God wants us to have fun,
he wants us to have relationships that are fulfilling,
he wants us to have security and a job that we deepens us

but he wants us to share those things with him.
He doesn't want us to shut him out
he doesn't want us to go it alone
He doesn't want us to have that 'bit on the side' – that whispers lies about how good they'll make us feel

He wants to share our lives – because he know that is the BEST for us
He wants to share our lives – because we were made for him!

God is Jealous.

He says "you are mine"
I dreamed about you before the beginning of time,
I loved you before even I made you,
I formed you, I sacrificed myself for you,
I called you, I saved you, and now "you are mine".

The stunning truth about not "creating idols"
is that it proves how precious we are to God.

If God didn't care –
he wouldn't be bothered what we do with our lives or
where we spend our time and passion

But because he cares,
because he made us for himself,
because he wants to share his life with us,
because we have a future with him
he shows how precious we are
and therefore when we sell ourselves short, and make rubbish choices
his heart breaks
when we bring home mistresses which (he knows) will disappoint, deform and destroy us.
His heart breaks.

The reason why this matters is because
our idols destroy us
they will disappoint us, deform us, distance us from God – not only us but our children too!

and finally

3. They rob us of any real experience of God's never-ending love.

God says “***I will show*** my love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments”.

What a promise!

God says, keep my commandments: get rid of the idols!
love me and I will show you my love....

Look I know of no other way of getting rid of our Idols except this:

1) to understand, to know, to **really** know, that

if you put your need for love ultimately in people they will not give you what you need.

Only God’s love will never let you down, only he will never fail you, only he will show you unconditional love

Put your need for love ultimately in God

if you judge your success by the world’s applause,

by your friend’s cheers,

by your work’s promotions,

they will fade – only God’s smile on your life, only his approval, only his affirmation will give you lasting joy

Judge your success by God’s approval of you!

if you make money to invest in material things and not in the kingdom of God – you are wasting your life
use your money to build for eternity, to see people’s lives changed forever, to invest in something that will never fade, or rust, or go out of fashion.

I know of no other way to get rid of the idols except to say
that you need **to know and be convinced** on this truth that
your Idol IS NOT what you need.

And then look for his love

Look for his love and you will find it everywhere.

When God gave this commandment to his people.

He said “look at my love for you”

He said

“I am the Lord God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the Land of Slavery

He said “look at who I am to you, look at what I have done for you”

Tonight God says the same to you and me,

When he gives you this command –

no other God, no Idols,

He says “look at who I am to you, look at what I have done for you”

He says, I am the Lord God –

I am **your** Creator, the one who spoke **you** into being,

the one who shaped you and designed you,

who made you.

Look at what I have done for you

I called you by name – you are no accident

I have given you eternal value – you are not just random atoms

I have dreamt about your future – death is not your end

I have given you a purpose to be a blessing for all the people you meet.

I have been sacrificed by you (most of your life), discarded by you, rejected by you, ignored by you and still

I love you.

No other person will do that for you!

If you have no other God before me,
if you make for yourself no Idols,
if you will love me
then I will show you my love
and it will stretch as high as the heavens,
as far as the east is from the west,
to the very ends of time itself.

It is a promise to you and a 1,000 generations that come after you!
If you would make God the God of your life
He promises to show you his love.
That is my experience,
This is my testimony
This is what I see and hear and witness every week of being a minister
And it can be yours too!