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IN LOVE WITH A DECOY

1 John 5:20-21

Eleven years ago Laurie and I had a two week sojourn in Idaho. We were eager to go home days before our scheduled departure so the day we were to fly home we were happy to head for the Spokane airport. As you know we have a sometimes unfortunate history with airlines. This particular day the perpetrators would be the future employer of our son in law. We checked in for our flight then took seats in the gate area to wait for boarding. About a half hour later they made an announcement. Our flight was canceled due to mechanical issues. What followed was a frustrating comedy of errors as we tried to get a flight out. There was a huge line at the Delta ticketing area. Knowing that standing in that line it was going to take forever to get another flight, I tried to circumvent the problem by calling the airline. We absolutely did not want to spend a night in Spokane. After I explained the problem to the representative she informed me there was another flight we could get on and we should go to a counter at the other end of the terminal. We hot footed it down there hauling our luggage, stood in line, then talked to the agent, who informed me that my information was wrong, the flight was sold out and there were no seats available. We went through all that pursuing something that was never there in the first place.

We walked the length of that airport repeatedly that day in search of a flight and did eventually get home that night. But I remembered that experience of chasing something that was never there when I studied the verses we are going to look at today, because that’s what many, many people are doing in a particular way. It is a way John mentions in these verses. At the very end of 1 John the apostle warns about following this path. It is one that can have a very negative effect on our lives. Let’s look at 1 John 1:20-21.

WHY IS IDOL WORSHIP AN ISSUE?

In verse 20 John summed up one of the important themes of this book. We know the Son of God has come. We know that by putting our faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we know the true God and have eternal life. That is one of the major points John drove home repeatedly in this letter because it was being denied by false teachers.

Then John gives a surprising closing comment. “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” Most of the letters in the New Testament end with some sort of greeting, or benediction, a prayer of blessing. John does none of that. He simply says, “Keep yourselves from idols.” This is more than a little surprising because there has been no mention of idol worship whatsoever in the entire book. So this comment seems to come out of left field, with almost not context whatsoever. Why would John say that as his parting comment?

Possibly a more pertinent question is why should we even worry about idols? Idol worship is rampant in parts of the world, but for most of us it just isn’t a thing. It is not a big deal in our culture and for most of us it doesn’t even relate to how we think and live. However, this command has direct application to our lives. In fact, it is a command everyone of us has failed to heed at times, and could be failing at even now. Our failure has implications and consequences. I will explain that shortly, but in order to understand this problem let me give you a bit of background.

John hadn’t mentioned idols because that was not the main threat that he addressed in this letter. Dealing with a particular heresy was the main purpose of this letter. But idolatry was part of the culture that his readers grew up in and lived in. The lack of reference in this letter to the Hebrew Scriptures gives us a clue that these people were almost all Gentiles. They grew up in a pagan society in which idols were everywhere. To them worshiping idols was as normal as going to school would be for us. They thought nothing of it.

You get a glimpse of this in Acts 17 when Paul went to Athens. In verse 16 it says, “While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” Everywhere Paul looked he saw idols. They even had some that were for the god “question mark” just to make sure they covered all the bases. In 1 Thessalonians 1:9 Paul commended the Thessalonian Christians because of what he had heard about them. “They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” They came out of backgrounds where worshiping idols was the norm. This was also true of John’s readers.

There are things we do in our nation that we don’t think twice about, but that other cultures view as offensive. For instance, we think giving someone a thumbs up is a positive and affirming thing, but in much of the world it is considered a rude gesture. When someone gives us a gift we feel what is proper is to receive it graciously with thanks. But in many parts of the world that’s considered rude. You are supposed to refuse the gift several times. In China it is expected that you would refuse it at least 3 times before accepting it.

We do these things and if someone told us we shouldn’t, we would think that strange. Why would anyone have a problem with that? That’s how many of the people John wrote to would have felt about idols. It was a normal part of their culture. Why would anyone have a problem with that? However, worshiping idols, was a way bigger problem than being offensive. It was spiritually dangerous. John wants to make sure we know that. I’ll explain why it is bad shortly.

We have a tendency to give ourselves a pass on this because we don’t think we have a problem with worshiping idols. But we should notice that idolatry has been a persistent and pervasive part of human nature. God addressed this problem when he set up his deal with Israel. Exodus 20 lists the commands that God etched on stones and gave to Moses, the ones that would form the basis of his agreement with Israel. Verse 4 says, “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.” Wait, I get no image of something in heaven, but no images of anything on earth or in the waters? So that singing bass fish that hangs on a wall is a no-no? No, that’s not the point. You have to go on to the next verse. “You shall not bow down to them or worship them.” It’s no problem to make a stuffed animal, which is good because we’ve got a bunch of them. The problem is making things that represent supposed gods and then worshiping them. In other words, turning them into an idol. Nobody worships the singing fish or any of our stuffed animals.

This proved to be a timely command. It was violated before the people even received it. Moses was up on Mt. Sinai for 6 weeks getting all the info from God about the new arrangement. Exodus 32:1 says, “When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, ‘Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow, Moses, who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’” So Aaron made an idol for them, a calf made out of gold. It didn’t take long for them to revert to idolatry.

God made it abundantly clear that idol worship would land you on the naughty list in a hurry. Yet worshiping idols would be a constant problem with God’s chosen people. Psalm 31:6 says, “I hate those who cling to worthless idols.” Psalm 106:36 says of the people of Israel, “They worshiped their idols, which became a snare to them.” Isaiah said about the people of Israel in Isaiah 2:8, “Their land is full of idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their fingers have made.”

Israel worshiped the God of Israel, kind of. But they saw the people around them worshiping their own idols, their gods of sun, moon, fields, animals, crops, fertility and everything else. When they saw some of those people prospering they thought, “hey, why not? I will worship my God, but I’ll worship theirs too, because maybe it will work for me. It seems to be working for them.” That continued right up to the time they were finally destroyed by the Babylonians.

This suggests the problem of worshiping idols is endemic and persistent, even among people who should know better. Great, thanks for the history lesson, Rick, but so what? What does that have to do with us? I don’t have any idols, and I don’t know anyone who does. So how does this have any relevance for me today? In 1 Corinthians 10 Paul opened the chapter talking about some of the things that happened with the people of Israel in the wilderness. In verse 7 he said, “Do not be idolaters, as some of them were.” Then in verse 11 he wrote, “Those things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings to us.” In verse 12 he said, “If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.”

In other words, idolatry is still a problem, so you’d better watch out. Well, sure, but that was for those people in Corinth in the first century where idolatry was rampant. Not true here. Not so fast. In Ephesians 5:5 Paul wrote, “For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person, such a person is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ.” Paul said a greedy person is an idolater! Colossians 3:5 says the same. “Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature, sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire and greed, which is idolatry.” There it is again. Greed is idolatry.

We can still excuse ourselves by saying we are not greedy. But the fact that Paul says idolatry is greed opens up a whole new understanding of what idolatry actually is. Clearly it is not just the act of making a little statue and worshiping it. Greedy people don’t do that. And yet Paul claimed they were worshiping idols! Doesn’t that suggest there might be other ways we might be guilty of idolatry without having a little statue involved? Yes, it does.

The stubborn persistence of this problem among God’s people serves as a warning to us, lest we think we don’t have the problem. A long time ago I was at the office of a dermatologist. He preached to me the gospel of sun block, wearing a hat and staying out of the sun. I balked a bit at that. He said, “What color are your eyes?” “Blue.” “Is your hair light or dark?” (this is when I had hair and it wasn’t gray). “Light.” “Do you have a light complexion or a dark one?” “Light.” “Do you know where light haired, light skinned, blue eyed people come from? They come from places far north, where there’s not a lot of sunshine. They don’t come from places like sunny Southern California. Do you know what that means?” “Uh, it’s hard for me to get a good tan?” “No, it means you’re not well suited to live in a place like this that has a lot of direct sun. It means if you don’t take the precautions I’ve told you about, you will get skin cancer.” I have been careful, but I have still ended up with a couple of bouts of skin cancer. My point here is, because of who I am, skin cancer is a problem for me and I need to be careful about it. Because of who we all are, fallen humans, idolatry will be a problem for us. It is a problem for all of us because ***human nature naturally bends toward idolatry***. The late biblical scholar, J. C. Ryle, wrote, “Idolatry is a natural product of man’s heart. It is a weed, which like the uncultivated earth, the heart is always ready to bring forth.” If we just let nature take its course, just as surely as if I let nature take its course physically I will end up with skin cancer, so, also, spiritually we will end up worshiping idols.

WHY IS IDOLATRY DANGEROUS?

First, understand that there are a couple of ways we can have an idol, even if we never actually make a little statue to worship. We get a hint about one of those ways in those passages that say greed is idolatry. What that tells us is that when we put something in place of God as the center of all things, the focus of life, we have made it an idol.

Pastor and author, Tim Keller, said, “Idolatry is making good things into ultimate things…It is building your life and meaning on anything, even a good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us.” The late Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, “an idol is anything in our lives that occupies the place that should be occupied by God alone… anything that holds a controlling position in my life is an idol.” Idolatry begins whenever there is something we want more than we want to worship and obey God.

Knowing this, we begin to understand why Paul said that greed is idolatry. The greedy person says that life is about money. Money becomes the thing that will give him life. Money is what life is about, the one who has the most money at the end, wins. Money controls the greedy person. He builds his entire life on the pursuit of money. That means it is an idol.

This means that there is an almost endless plethora of possible idols. One can place intellect in the central position in life and build a life in pursuit of it. Our own pride can be an idol. Physical beauty or fitness could take control of our lives. Success is an obvious one. The approval of other people can and does become something many build their lives on. Something that has become a huge idol for many people in our culture is their sexuality and their sexual identity. It becomes so important to them that it takes precedence over anything God could ever say about it. God, if he is to have a place in their lives, must conform whatever he says to their position on their sexuality. As I said, there is almost no end to the list of things that can become idols.

A second way we create an idol is by creating a faulty image of God. This is the problem with making a little statue of God. As soon as you have made something to represent God you have reduced him in your mind to something far less than he actually is. Did Aaron’s golden calf accurately depict the nature of God? Absolutely not. We can do that without ever making a statue when we have a faulty mental image of God.

That brings me back to the question of what is so bad about worshiping an idol. What makes idolatry such a bad thing? German philosopher Georg Hegel said, “Life only has value when it has something valuable as its object.” He’s right, the value of a life is really determined by the value of the object of that life. When we substitute some thing, some idol that is, by definition, of lesser value than God himself, our lives actually lose value. A fact few people realize is that we cheapen life when we put anything other than the true God at the center of it.

Isaiah 44:13-16 depicts a carpenter chopping down a tree, using some of the wood for a fire and making an idol from the rest. Half of the wood he burns in his fire, then verse 17 says, “From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, ‘Save me! You are my god!’” How dumb is that? The same wood he uses to cook his wood over he uses to make into an idol, then he bows down to it. The obvious question this begs is, “Can a block of wood save him?” He’d have to be as dumb as a block of wood to believe that.

A person who does that is putting his faith in something that can never save him or her, never give them what they desire from it. That should tell us something about idols. Whether a person’s idol is a block of wood or metal, or whether it is some other created thing, money, success, power, or anything else, it cannot save a person. It cannot give them life. By worshiping that idol a person is doomed to living a life of empty pursuit and ultimate futility.

A few years ago due to concern over albatrosses that had become endangered, the Japanese put 100 decoy birds on the Izu islands. The hope was the endangered birds would come there and breed on the island. One particular bird, a 5 year old albatross they named Deko, became enamored of one of the decoys. For 2 years he wooed the ersatz bird by building fancy nests for it, fighting off potential rivals, and spending his days standing by her side. Researcher Fumio Sato discussed the bird’s infatuation with the decoy, saying, “He seems to have no desire to date real birds.” When we center our lives on anything other than the true God, we are being as foolish as Deko. It will never give us what we want from it. It cannot save us. And, also like Deko, it keeps us from the real thing.

When we form our own gods, we inevitably will create them according to our own biases, and they will never be able to confront the real issues in our lives. I know of someone who is highly successful in her job. She has done well and one aspect of her success comes from a consistent ability to work well with pretty much everyone. She recently had a performance review. Her boss had nothing but glowing words for her. But as part of the review there was a peer review. This was also largely positive. However, there was one small negative. A couple of peers said this individual could be threatening.

I can tell you with absolute confidence that this is one of the least threatening people I know. Part of the reason she has been able to get along so well with people is that she does not ever seek to threaten, dominate or intimidate anyone. She has always been loved by those she works with. This comment was a jarring contrast to who this person actually is. In fact, she could be accused of being accommodating and conciliatory to a fault. So what was going on there? This person, though always kind to others, is also remarkably able. What happened was someone felt inferior by comparison. Feeling that sense of inferiority they projected that on the other person and blamed her for it. It was her manner that made them feel this way. They basically created their own image of the person.

Unfortunately, by doing that the individuals avoided confronting the real problem, which was in themselves. It meant they would never get better, because the problem wasn’t the other person, it was themselves. When we have an idol, we essentially create a false image of God. When we do that, it allows us to avoid ever facing the truth about ourselves. One of the things that will always be a consequence of having an idol, is moral, ethical and personal weakness and failings. In the end this is inevitable because we have substituted something lesser for the true goodness, holiness and righteousness of God. In the end this will mean less goodness, holiness and righteousness in us as well.

Think back to why ancient Israelis had such a problem with idols for so long. Yes, they had the God of Israel. But as we learned earlier, they also saw neighbors worshiping their own gods. In many cases, those idol worshiping neighbors were getting things that the Israelis wanted. Maybe it was big crops, or security from raiders or a threatening nation, or lots of children. So the Israelis would also worship their gods in order to get whatever that thing they wanted.

In the end, idolatry always involves superstition. It is an attempt to somehow influence or even control the non-human powers one thinks are out there to manipulate them into using their supposed powers to get what one wants. What that means is that what is supposed to be worship actually ends up being worship of self. It is putting self and what I want at the very center of things. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* says, “idols are really an expression of self worship.” In her book, *Smoke On The Mountain*, Joy Davidman wrote, “The beast in the heart is always the self. In the last analysis there are only two things to worship – the true power and the false power – God or self.”

The most frightening aspect of this is that worship of self is the cause of all the evil in the world. When we worship self the ultimate good becomes whatever I want, and true evil is for me not to get it. What happens to other people does not matter, all that matters is that I get what I want. Laurie and I know a man who presents himself as a faithful believer in Jesus, a good man, always quick to share kind words. Unfortunately, we happen to know some things about how this man operates. He wants money. He has pride, thinking himself smarter than other people. He has an idol that he doesn’t seem to see. The result of this is that by his own admission he does things that are devious, in an attempt to sneak things by people that he hopes will force them to give him more money. He has actually done things that are illegal, and he certainly has been unkind. When we have an idol, which ultimately means we are worshiping ourselves, it should be no surprise if we become deceitful, dishonest and unkind. That’s because all that matters is self, so hurting other people won’t concern us.

Psalm 16:4 says, “Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more.” The English Standard Version translation of the verse is, “the sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply.” How ironic, that people choose another god beside the true God because they really want something for themselves. But all that happens is that they multiply their sorrows. Isaiah 44:19 continues depicting the stupidity of a person bowing down to a block of wood. Then verse 20 says of this individual, “Such a person fees on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him; he cannot save himself, or say, ‘Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?’”

When we pursue as the center of life anything other than God, we become like that person. We are deluded, misled. We cannot save ourselves. We can’t see the obvious, that we are pursuing a lie. And so, like that person, we feed on ashes. Having ashes for dinner seems to me to be highly unappealing. Back in October of 1996 as the dreaded Santa Ana winds arrived, a brush fire started to the east of us. That fire quickly roared out of control and began racing west, heading in our direction. We had to evacuate. Even as we were loading up our car ashes were falling out of the sky, coating our car and other surfaces. We were gone for a couple of days. The fire got within 200 yards of our house, and all around us the hills were burned and blackened. For months afterward at our house it smelled like we lived in a fireplace. The smell of ashes permeated everything, everywhere around. It was not pleasant. I can tell you this for absolutely certain. I would not have been even slightly interested in having ashes for dinner. Would you like those ashes rare, medium or well done? Pass. In fact, the idea is abhorrent. When we have an idol, when we serve anything, anything except the one true God who is the center of all of life, we will end up with ashes in our mouths. No thank you.

APPLICATION

BE ALERT

Remember the statement by J. C. Ryle that idolatry is like a weed, and that our hearts naturally produce this weed. One thing that has been a bit of frustration for me is that we have never been able to grow a thick, beautiful lawn. We have grass in our front yard, and it’s all right, but it’s not that gorgeous, thick grass you occasionally see. However, I have noticed we have no problem growing weeds. At one point our front yard was green, but it was mostly because the weeds were green. We didn’t plant them. We don’t cultivate them. They just happen.

I tell you that because idols are like those weeds. We don’t have to plant them. We don’t have to cultivate them. They just crop up. When we think we are immune from this problem we’re kidding ourselves. It’s inherent in our nature. Nancy Ortberg, wife of pastor John Ortberg and speaker in her own right, says, “We all have a golden calf…And some of us, if we’re absolutely truthful, have a whole herd of golden calves.” So we need to be on the alert for them, looking for them, because they have such negative impacts on our lives and our world.

Here’s a tip. When you are feeling anger, bitterness, resentment, discouragement, jealousy, envy, if you lack joy, or peace, somewhere in your heart there is an idol. It is important to identify our idols, so that we can learn to reject them.

KEEP GOD AS YOUR FOCUS

When anything beside serving, worshiping and loving God is the endpoint of your attentions, your attitudes or your actions, you are engaging in idolatry.

Vanuatu is an island nation in the South Pacific that was once known as the New Hebrides. The Melanesian islanders that lived in the remote villages of those islands had, in many cases, little to no contact with the outside world prior to the 1940’s. That all changed abruptly when World War 2 swept through the South Pacific. A massive influx of American military personnel flooded the islands, initially in support of the pivotal Guadalcanal campaign. They brought with them huge amounts of manufactured goods, including clothing, structures, Jeep’s, aircraft and lots of food. The natives had never seen such things and had no knowledge whatsoever of modern manufacturing and production. In their minds the mountains of these items could only be the product of divine powers. They were sure that deities were using their great powers to create these marvels. After the war ended the flow of material stopped. No more cargo came parachuting out of the sky like it had previously, no more airplanes full of cargo landed at the airstrip. The islanders wanted the deities to send the cargo again. They formed cults dedicated to honoring and beseeching the deities to renew the flow of goods. They tried to dress like the US soldiers. They built makeshift control towers. They carved “headphones” out of wood to wear in the tower. They would mimic the landing signals they had seen Americans waving. They lit fires to light the airstrip at night. They even built replicas of aircraft and carved new airstrips in the jungle. They didn’t know the supposed deities. They just wanted the goods. That’s what they cared about, and they would do whatever they thought would convinced these foreign gods to resume sending the goods from out of the sky.

Those people were very human. Their focus was not on the true God, it was on stuff for themselves. So they ended up doing foolish and useless things in a superstitious attempt to influence powers out there to give it to them. Billions of people do the same thing in different ways. The only way to avoid that is to live with the true God as the focal point and goal of everything in our lives.