

Talk 2:

This morning we ended with the reminder and encouragement to make God, make Jesus Christ, the center of our world and life. There is a remarkable Psalm that reminds us again that we are to worship, not to be worshipped. And not only that, but it reveals what is confirmed throughout Scripture—that one of the consequences of idolatry is that you become like what you worship. The first part is written in your booklet:

Psalm 115:1-8

- ¹ Not to us, LORD, not to us
but to your name be the glory,
because of your love and faithfulness.
- ² Why do the nations say,
"Where is their God?"
- ³ Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.
- ⁴ But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.
- ⁵ They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see;
- ⁶ they have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell;
- ⁷ they have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk;
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.
- ⁸ **Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.**

When I was a graduate student, I looked up to guy in my lab who seemed to know everything. Rick was the man. If you had a question about a procedure or needed to reserve a piece of equipment or advice on an experiment—it was always, “Go ask Rick.” I am single guy, struggling to get by in Baltimore on a graduate stipend; and Rick is married with kids and a house—a professional, PhD student. Several years later after we both had graduated and moved on—I would often catch myself doing things, odd things, that Rick used to do. One was taking a deep breath before giving an answer... I guess it seemed ‘wise’ or something. But if someone asked me a question at work... [Breathe in!], “Yes, I believe we can have that done by Thursday”; or the hardest one to shake was he would do this silly thing with his watch and wrist everytime you would talk to him. And honestly, when I wear a watch, I still do this!

“Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” I never thought, oh Rick is my idol—but I worshipped him enough to become like him even in little ways. In this psalm we see that those who trust in idols will become less than

human, wooden, lifeless. Even in Exodus 32, which you will study tomorrow, the people who worship the golden calf are described in animal terms—all worked up in a fury and ‘stiff-necked.’ That the psalmist mentions “God does whatever pleases him” is simply a declaration that we don’t create, make, manipulate or control God—God does what God does. As his very name reflects, “I am who I am”. To his name be glory.

The good news is that the opposite is also true—that ongoing worship of the true and living God results in becoming like him... and so far we have seen that this God is one who sees, hears, cares, creates, rescues, redeems... and from this Psalm, God is loving and faithful (v.1). Become like him.

This spiritual principle that you become like what you worship is a corollary to the spiritual reality that we are created to worship. Bob Dylan was right when he wrote the fairly popular song—“Gotta Serve Somebody”

You may be an ambassador to England or France,
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance,
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody,
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

As persons created by God, we’re gonna have to serve somebody since it is in our very nature to worship—it is that sense of amazement and wonder we have when we first see the vastness of the Grand canyon or get a glimpse of life at the ocean depths or stand before the giant Sequoias or see the first bud of Spring or—if we’re out of the city on a clear night—when see the vast array of stars. These all call forth worship in us because we’re made that way—but we aren’t to worship these things but rather the Creator to whom these things point. “Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.” (Paul writes in Romans 1). No matter how you might believe God created, God is the creator and created us to worship.

Of course God as Creator knows this... and so the first commandment to his newly rescued and established people is, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Continuing now in the story of Israel being delivered from Egypt by the mighty hand of God—they begin the journey and experience of being formed into a people set apart for God’s purpose. After crossing the sea miraculously, they travel in the desert on the way to the promised land—and God provides food and water and protects them even though they grumbled and wondering if God was really with them. Two months later they come to the foot of Mt Sinai in the desert and camp in front of the mountain. **Exodus 19** records:

Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and holy nation.’”

God here uses very intimate language to describe the rescue of his people from the slavery and oppression and idolatry of Egypt... “I brought you to myself.” And notice the why God can claim Israel as his own... “The whole earth is mine.” This is why this God is greater than all gods... because he created it all. In the psalms and prophets, virtually every time mention is made of God being above all gods—it is coupled with the reason that God created it all (the heavens and the earth).

Ps. 95:3-5: “For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.”

And the people responded to God’s remarkable words, “I brought you to myself” with – “We will do everything the LORD has said.” Well, I hope so... This leads into the opening of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:

“And God spoke all these words:

"I am the LORD **your God**, [no longer just the God of your fathers but your God] who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. "You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them 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.

The second command, “You shall not bow down to *them* or worship *them*” (plural)—refers back to commandment one. These two commandments are related to each other—God is calling for exclusive worship and for a ban on creating any images that would tempt his people to worship (even if they thought it represented Yahweh). Fashioning images or idols would go against how God chooses to reveal himself to his people, images would fail to deal adequately with the true nature of Yahweh, images would limit the freedom of God to relate to the world as he chooses—and guards against abuse and exploitation—something I think the next commandment is about as well: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God.”

Scholars have pointed out the uniqueness of these two commandments especially among polytheistic ancient cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia. One writes, “It is not unusual

for any people to make great claims for their own deity—but to claim transcendent uniqueness and universality for that deity to exclusion of all others and to defend the claim by reference to God’s extraordinary and unparalleled ‘jealousy’ was something not found in anything like the same degree elsewhere.”

“Idolatry is the worship of any gods in the place of the living God.” The problem with idolatry is it is not simply an external problem—little wooden figures to ignore or worldly affairs to avoid—it is also (and mainly) an internal problem. In fact, it is likely that idols arise (whether personal or national) as expressions of a heart looking to worship something in place of the true and living God. In fact, trusting in idols is essentially saying God does not hear or see; God does not create or redeem; God is not faithful or loving.

“Idols are often good things (family, achievement, work and career, education, romance, talent) that we turn into ultimate things in order to get the significance, joy, and security we need. Then they drive us into the ground b/c we have to have them. **If we lose a good thing, it makes us sad. If we lose an idol it devastates us.**”

Unmasking idols is clearly a good thing, though it is not an easy thing—and will always be received badly by society and by your soul. Count on it. The unmasking of idols, however, is not simply a Christian duty because of our love for the true God—who alone is worthy of devotion—but also a Christian duty because of our love for those who do not worship the true God. And before we are able, with integrity, to unmask the idol-worship—we need to be honest about our own failures here. That’s why the attitude of humility and love is key as we saw in the last session. Here we need to reflect upon and repent from where we have invested hope and trust in something or someone who is incapable of such a reward.

At the end of his first epistle, the beloved disciple, John, concludes his letter in what seems at first glance an odd ending. “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” But look closer at this and it’s a perfect ending to what John (through the Holy Spirit of course) has been saying all along the letter... “This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands.” And “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” And this right before the end: “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Keep yourselves from idols... they don’t hear, they can’t respond to our prayers, they aren’t true, there is no life in them. God hears, God responds, God is true, God is Life.

I want to close by giving you some time of reflection to consider what has gripped us, what has taken our attention off of God, the true and living God who has called us to himself for his purposes in the world?

How do we discern what idols may have a hold on us? In some ways, this is an easy exercise—some things may come quickly to mind... but it's the reflection and deeper unmasking that makes this perhaps painful exercise a fruitful one. God wants what is best for us, He is good that way—and he loves us too much to allow a lifetime of chasing after 'gods' which will fail to deliver everything but disappointment.

I thought we'd close with the beginning of a reflection exercise using questions that begin to unmask some of the idols in our lives.

- What is my greatest nightmare? What do I worry about most?
- What (if I failed or lost it) would cause me to feel that I did not even want to live?
What keeps me going?
- What do I rely on or comfort myself with when things go bad or get difficult?
- What do I think most easily about? What does my mind go to when I am free? What pre-occupies me?
- What prayer, unanswered, would make me seriously think about turning away from God?
- What do I really want and expect out of life? What would really make me happy?