

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Idolatry

(Jeremiah 7-10; Colossians 3:5; 1 John 5:21)

Study #4

Sermon series: Faithful

(Stories from Jeremiah)

Introduction: The view from an auto-rickshaw...

Back in the spring of 2019, when traveling was a thing, I made my first-ever trip to India with Paul Lere, a long-time friend and ministry partner. (Paul heads up International Training Partners.)

I went to take part in a workshop his organization was hosting on “Strengthening Your Interpersonal Skills”.

While in India, I got to know a few Christian workers from different parts of the country, ate lots of rice, and took in sights, sounds, smells I don’t usually see, hear, or smell in San Antonio.

One day, while moving through the city of Agra with a couple of new friends in an auto-rickshaw (referred to as a Tuk-Tuk in India), they pointed to a flat-bed trailer with a very colorful statue of a man standing next to a statue of a tiger.

My friends - they were missionaries - told me, *“That’s a god.”*

Now these missionaries weren’t heretics, and they knew that the figure wasn’t a god. They were just referring to the statue the way the crowds on the street who were bowing down to the statue would have referred to it.

This was, for me, a unique, up-close, and personal contact with idolatry. It was, at once, surprising, unnerving, a little bit maddening - and sad.¹

While preparing this message, I thought about that experience and others I had while in India.

That’s because today in our time in the Bible we’re going to look into a topic you and I may not think about all that often. Today, we’re thinking about idolatry.

Orienting to the theme of idolatry...

My brushes with Hinduism in India prompted me then to think more deeply about idol-worship than I ever had. This week my studies in Jeremiah pushed my thinking further and deeper.

I have been asking myself and the biblical text and other sources, *“Why?”* Why the ages-long and seemingly universal human interest in worshiping a physical object, something that is not God? What’s the draw?

We’ll think about that today.

Webster’s dictionary defines an *“idol”* as *“an image or other material object representing a deity to which religious worship is addressed...a false conception or notion of God.”*

“Idolatry” is the worship of this physical or mental image.

The Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments. And throughout both divisions, God’s people are told to have nothing to do with idolatry.

In fact, the second of the Ten Commandments given to the Jews is a direct prohibition of idolatry.

¹ In 1986, I went to Guyana, South America, to teach at a Bible College for a couple of weeks. Guyana is populated by nearly equal parts African Muslims and Indian Hindus. It was the first time I ever heard the daily Muslim calls to prayer, and it was the first time I saw idols.

They were told, [Exodus 20:4] ***“You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth...”***

Despite the command, though, they STILL practiced idolatry.²

Then, with no reference to the Ten Commandments, the New Testament gives warnings to Christians to flee idolatry (i.e. - the worship of anything other than God.)

And as we wrap up today, we’ll see just how relevant the topic of idolatry is to us - believers in Jesus - who are still tempted to idolize things and people rather than God.

In India, “gods” and “goddesses” are paraded through city streets, and thus has it always been, in India and everywhere else.

All people everywhere are drawn to worship that which is NOT God. And to highlight the prevalence of idolatry among, not just any people, but God’s people, let’s trace it in the long history of Israel.

Israel’s History with Idolatry

The Jewish people came from idol-worshiping stock, including Abraham, the father of the Jews. Joshua, who led the Jews into the Promised Land, tells us that Abraham and his family ***“served other gods.”*** (Joshua 24:2)

And idolatry wasn’t put away after Abraham and his family were chosen by the one, true God. Three generations after Abraham, Rachel (the wife of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob) was found to be in possession of household idols. (Genesis 31)

There is good evidence that while the Jews were spending four hundred years as slaves in Egypt, they worshiped the gods of Egypt.

² God warned them to avoid idolatry, even by the way He referred to the idols. In the prophetic books, God sometimes called idols ***“that which can be rolled around”*** (Ezekiel 20:31), or ***“trouble”*** or ***“sorrow”*** or ***“dread”*** or ***“terror”*** (Isaiah 66:3; Jeremiah 50:38).

We know that they brought Egyptian idols with them as they left and headed for the Red Sea.

After the Red Sea crossing, the Israelites found themselves at the base of Mount Sinai, waiting for Moses to come down to give them God’s Law. Then, becoming impatient for his return, they made a golden calf to worship. Yes, they committed idolatry while waiting for the command that prohibited idolatry. (Exodus 32)

Forty years later, they entered the Promised Land - and promptly began worshipping the false gods of the Canaanites and the Philistines.

Read the stories of Gideon, Samson and Samuel and you’ll be impressed with how quickly God’s people succumbed to the temptation to idolatry.

And tragically, after God appointed kings to rule in place of the judges, the kings - with rare exceptions - led the nation into the way of idolatry.

- Idolatry flourished in the latter days of the reign of “wise” King Solomon.
- King Jeroboam (the first northern king) enticed the Jews to worship golden calves.³
- Late in the history of the nation, King Manasseh defiled the temple with idols and offered his own son as a sacrifice to idols.

Clearly, by the time we come to Jeremiah, Israel has had a long, tragic track record of involvement with idolatry.

So, early in his prophetic career, Jeremiah hiked into Jerusalem and stood up to speak against it. (Jeremiah 7)

Last Sunday, Jeff told us about the prophet’s long and unpopular ministry.

³ In Hezekiah’s day the people worshiped the bronze serpent Moses had made at God’s command so that they could be healed of bites from poisonous snakes that the Lord had allowed to afflict them. The idolatrous worship of the snake prompted Hezekiah to destroy it.

This one was another “bad news” sermon that nobody wanted to hear.⁴ And this time, the bad news was really bad.

He delivered this message while standing at the gate leading into the temple itself, starting off with dire warnings.

- “Don’t think that just because you come to the temple, you’ll escape God’s judgment!” (7:4)
- “Don’t assume that you can get away with sin just because you are His children!” (7:8-11)
- “Don’t think that God won’t discipline you for your rebellion!” (7:12-15)⁵

God even told Jeremiah, [7:16] **“As for you, do not pray for this people, and do not lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me; for I do not hear you.”**

And what was it that the people were doing that was so incensed God? They were practicing idolatry.

Parenthetical: *Why? What’s the draw of idolatry?*

Now, before moving forward into the text of Jeremiah, I want to stop and go back to the question I was asking myself this week, “Why?” Why idolatry? What was the draw?

Two Sundays ago (Jeremiah, chapter 2), we listened as the Lord - through Jeremiah - accused the Jews of committing two evils.

One, they abandoned God, the source of “living water.”
Two, they dug “cisterns” - a metaphor for things other than God - for themselves that held no water.

By these “cisterns” they were trying to find LIFE outside of the God who promised to sustain, protect, and provide for them.

Cistern-digging is an attempt to find LIFE outside of a trusting relationship with God. I have come to believe that idolatry is very similar to cistern-digging.

By choosing to worship something or someone other than the one, true God, they ancient Jews were seeking CONTROL.

They were greedily seeking to use higher authorities - in their case, false gods - to get what they wanted, even wrong things, even at the expense of and to the detriment of others - on the battlefield and in the marketplace and in the family.

Essentially, idolatry is a way of living that attempts to gain CONTROL over life, rather than a way that submits to God’s control.⁶

We see this self-centered, power-hungry greed on display as Jeremiah called the Jews out for three specific sorts of idols the Jews were worshiping.

Multiple gods were in Jeremiah’s mind as he writes, but he specifically called the Jews out for their worship of Baal.

Idolatry Addressed by Jeremiah

Manifestations of Idolatry

Baal (7:9; see also 2:23-24)

[7:9] Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal⁷ and walk after other gods that you have not known...⁸

Baal was always thought of as among the most powerful gods in the Canaanite pantheon, and there were centers for the worship of Baal scattered throughout the land of Canaan.

⁴ Gleason Archer says that the major theme of this prophecy consists of giving a stern warning to Judah to turn from idolatry to avoid the catastrophe of exile.

⁵ The biblical point is that if God destroyed Shiloh for its sinfulness, He will also surely destroy Jerusalem for its sinfulness. (7:12-15)

⁶ “The wise person tried to understand and benefit from all the worship he could manage of as many gods as he could get to know.” Douglas Stuart, “Exodus, Book of” in *Lexham Bible Dictionary*

⁷ “Baal” literally means “lord” or “master.”

⁸ See also Jeremiah 2:23-24.

He was the god who controlled the weather, so he was often pictured holding a lightning bolt in his hand. And Baal was also associated with fertility, so Baal's worship involved ritual prostitution.⁹

Read about the Jews' worship of Baal in Jeremiah 2 and you'll get the idea that they were addicted to Baalism.¹⁰

They had given up relying on the LORD to meet their needs. They turned instead to Baal, seeking control over nature and rains in season and bountiful harvests by offering sacrifice to him.¹¹

In this speech, Jeremiah also mentioned the Jews' devotion to what is referred to as "the queen of heaven."

Queen of Heaven (7:16-20)

[7:17] "Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? [18] "The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes¹² for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me."¹³

In Assyria, this goddess was called *Ishtar*. In Canaan, Ashtoreth. She was a fertility goddess and was associated with the planet Venus.

Worshipping (that is, offering sacrifices) "the queen of heaven" was thought to give control over crops and herds and to guarantee prosperity to family.

⁹ Jeremiah tells us that child sacrifice was also associated with the worship of Baal. (Jeremiah 19:5)

¹⁰ The images of chapter 2 are vividly sexual. Young camels were known to be unreliable and ungainly. Donkeys in heat were known to be violent in their search for a male. Thus, Israel is portrayed as unreliable (does not keep her covenant with God) and enslaved by a passion to seek the Baals.

¹¹ The focus on Baal over nature helps explain the showdown on Mount Carmel between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, with the ending of the story being God's victory as seen in a drought-ending thunderstorm. (1 Kings 18)

¹² These cakes were made in the form of a female.

¹³ See also Jeremiah 44:15-19 and note how the people were linking their provision of food to the offerings they were making to the queen of heaven. A clear controlling of the God to get what they wanted.

Again, the Jews were trusting in an idol, not in their God.¹⁴

Then, the Jews worshiped the sun, moon, and stars as if they were gods.¹⁵

The host of heaven (8:1-2)

[8:1] "At that time," declares the Lord, "they will bring out the bones of the kings of Judah and the bones of its princes, and the bones of the priests and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem from their graves. [2] "They will spread them out to the sun, the moon and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved and which they have served, and which they have gone after and which they have sought, and which they have worshiped. They will not be gathered or buried; they will be as dung on the face of the ground."¹⁶

Of course, the sun, moon, and stars are indeed wonders to behold.

I pay attention to the waxing and waning of the moon because I think it's cool. Moonless, star-studded nights are delightful, as are sun- or moonsets or moon- or sunrises, comets streaking by, and the constancy of the North Star and constellations.

Like the psalmist writes, the heavens declare the glory of the God who made them (Psalm 19).

But the sun, moon, and stars are not to be worshiped (See Deuteronomy 4:19), and in the days of Jeremiah, that is exactly what the Jews were doing.

¹⁴ It has been suggested by some Bible scholars that in an awful syncretistic meshing of Judaism and Canaanite religion, the queen of heaven was thought to be the consort of Yahweh, the god of Israel.

¹⁵ The Canaanite culture was awash in the worship of the host of heaven. Some place names reflect this. "Beth-shemesh" means "the house of the sun." "Jericho" was named after the moon god, "Yerah."

¹⁶ See also Jeremiah 19:13.

They believed that worshiping the sun, moon, and stars would give wisdom. The host of heaven would keep you healthy and ward off evil dreams - if you worshiped them and not God.¹⁷

Idolatry flourished in the days of Jeremiah, and he wanted his people to stop worshiping anyone and anything but God.

He even resorted to ridicule to try to get his fellow Jews to see just how foolish idolatry is.

The Absurdity of Idolatry (10:3-10)

***[10:3]...the customs of the peoples are delusion;
Because it is wood cut from the forest,
The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool.
[4] "They decorate it with silver and with gold;
They fasten it with nails and with hammers
So that it will not totter.
[5] "Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they,
And they cannot speak;
They must be carried,
Because they cannot walk!
Do not fear them,
For they can do no harm,
Nor can they do any good."
...[8] But they are altogether stupid and foolish
In their discipline of delusion - their idol is wood!
[9] Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish,
And gold from Uphaz,
The work of a craftsman and of the hands of a goldsmith;
Violet and purple are their clothing;
They are all the work of skilled men.***¹⁸

Bottom line? The worship of anything but God is both sinful and silly.

¹⁷ The sun was seen as the image of the high god in Egyptian mythology - Re - (also in Indo-European and Meso-America mythology) who ruled over the heaven and earth. The sun-god bestowed light and life.

¹⁸ See also Isaiah 44:9-20; Hosea 8:5; 13:2; Habakkuk 2:18 for some very sarcastic, scathing rebukes for idolatry.

It makes no sense to praise, pray to, throw money at, offer sacrifice to, or otherwise worship something that is not God. And the Jews of ancient Israel were doing exactly that.

Now, here's how the story of idolatry among the ancient Jews concludes.

Because of their addiction to idolatry, God delivered them over to the Babylonian Empire for discipline. Jerusalem was destroyed and much of the population of the Jews spent seventy years in Babylonian captivity. (Jeremiah tells this part of the story in the latter chapters of his book.)

After this devastating discipline, Israel abandoned idolatry. To the credit of the Jews, after the Babylonian lesson, they were never again guilty of the kind of idolatry we've seen this morning.

Of course, they didn't perfectly rely on God, but they never again worshiped gods of wood, metal, and stone.

So, great. But are you now wondering what all of this has to do with us, today, who follow Jesus and who don't worship "gods" of wood or metal or stone? Are you ready to move on from idolatry to a consideration of something more relevant?

Well, it's not yet quite time to move on because, as we'll see, the New Testament has something to say about idol-worship, too.

And if we'll just hang in there, we'll see just how relevant the theme of idolatry really is, to us, today.

Idolatry and the Jesus Follower

Idolatry in the 1st Century WORLD

Seen in the Acts of the Apostles

The Jews may have walked away from idolatry, but non-Jews sure hadn't. And when the missionaries Paul and Barnabas took a Gospel-spreading trip through the region of Galatia (modern-day Turkey), they encountered idol-worshippers in the city of Iconium.

When Paul healed a lame man in the city, the citizens of Iconium immediately jumped to the conclusion, ***“the gods have become like men and have come down to us.”*** (Acts 14:11)

The Iconiumites saw the two Christian missionaries as gods / idols to whom they would now offer sacrifice.

They worshiped Paul and Barnabas because that’s what you do when you encounter a god. You try to please and appease him so that he’ll help you in life.

You take control of your life by controlling the god. And you control the god by the size and value of your sacrifice.

Paul confronted idolatry again, in the city of Athens (Acts 17) and he later disrupted the business of idol-makers in Ephesus by the miracles he performed there by Jesus’ power. (Acts 19)¹⁹

Idolatry was as widely understood everywhere Paul traveled in the Gentile world as it had been among the Jews of the Old Testament.

He even mentioned idolatry in his letters to Christian churches.

Seen in the New Testament letters

- He urged recently saved Gentiles to flee (1 Corinthians 10:14) and to walk away from (Galatians 5) idolatry.²⁰
- Idolatrous worship was very prevalent in the Roman Empire, so he urged Christians to befriend non-believing idolaters who needed Jesus (1 Corinthians 5).

¹⁹ One of the bigger challenges the early church faced involved the matter of how Law of Moses-obeying Jews and former idol-worshiping Gentiles were to get along in one Jesus-centered movement. It was such a big issue that an all-church council was convened in Jerusalem with representatives from both Jewish and non-Jewish factions. The word went out to the Gentile Christians that they should [Acts 15:20]...***abstain from things contaminated by IDOLS and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.***

²⁰ Believers who practice idolatry - and other sins - will not inherit the kingdom of God. They still possess eternal life, but they will not receive the reward of a great inheritance if they persist in sinful activities like idolatry.

- He warned his readers to take care when eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols because by doing that, they might tempt a former idolator to fall back into idolatry (1 Corinthians 10).²¹

What I hope I have shown by this wide-ranging consideration of idolatry, is that no matter where you look, what segment of society you examine, what historical time frame you explore, you’re going to find idolatry.

If you went to some of the places where some of the missionaries we support are serving Jesus you would find devout Hindus worshiping idols, Muslims worshiping what we would not call “God” and tribes in Africa worshiping ancestors and nature gods.

Whether the worship is of something metal or mental, everybody understands the vocabulary of idolatry. We all “get” that it is tempting to worship something other than God.

We know the temptation to allow something other than God to take God’s place and the worship of that which is not God (that’s *idolatry*) is alive and well in 2020.

And it’s with these thoughts in mind that I want to turn to two very provocative comments in the New Testament.

While the Apostle Paul was a prisoner under house arrest in Rome, he wrote a letter to the Christians in the city of Colossae. In the course of instructing and exhorting these believers to lead God-honoring lives, he said this.

Idolatry in the 1st and 21st Century HEART (Colossians 3:5)

Idolatry and greed (Colossians 3:5)

[Colossians 3:5] Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.

²¹ Paul affirmed that an idol is nothing. He also warned that by sharing a meal in an idol’s temple a Christian could become a sharer in demonism. He even instructed believers about how to behave if they were invited to eat meat sacrificed to idols.

Greed is over-reaching. Greed is straining to get what isn't rightfully mine. Another, older term for greed is "covet". Paul says here that for me to covet something that isn't rightfully mine is to commit idolatry.²²

The main focus of this "greed = idolatry" thought, biblically, seems to apply to material riches and to sex.

Paul's list of problematic acts and attitudes here in Colossians 3 include overtly sexually oriented sins (immorality, impurity).²³

Of course, it was God who created us, complete with sexual appetites. So, there is nothing wrong with a desire for sex, and there's nothing wrong and everything right with a husband and a wife being intimate.

But, according to what Paul writes, the pursuit of the illegitimate satisfaction of sexual desire - outside of marriage - is...idolatrous.

And you'll notice that by that statement our definition of idolatry just expanded.

Idolatry isn't restricted to ancient peoples trying to manipulate gods and goddess by sacrifices to gain control over their lives and get what they want.

It's greed for sexual control over another person. It's coveting sexual pleasure from someone to whom I'm not married.

Pornography is idolatry. Adultery is idolatry.

Paul's "greed = idolatry" thought also applies to material stuff. Money and wealth.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, **[Matthew 6:24] "You cannot serve God and wealth."**²⁴

So, if a Christian is serving money, meaning that he is primarily pursuing riches, comfort and ease, and the things money can buy, he is serving THAT instead of GOD. That's idolatry.

This morning's consideration of idolatry invites us each to take a good look at our personal lives and ask if we are giving a higher place, a greater priority, to anything other than God.

Have we placed sexual satisfaction above the value of pleasing Jesus? Am I or are you pursuing material success above the service of God?

If that's going on, we need to see that pursuit in biblical terms and admit that it's not just getting our priorities a little bit mixed up. It is idolatry.

Idolatry doesn't require wooden symbols of male or female deities. Idolatry is giving first place to anything or anyone other than God.

The second really provocative statement about idolatry is found near the end of our New Testaments in a letter written by the Apostle John.

Idolatry and the God of love (1 John 5:21)

John's first letter is all about fellowship - the fellowship that believers in Jesus can enjoy with each other - and how, and the fellowship that believers can enjoy with God - and how.

In this letter, John writes about the need to love and about the nature of God. He says that God is light, God is forgiving, and God is love.

He assures us that Jesus, who came to earth in the flesh, is God. Eternal life is given as a gift to the one who believes in Jesus.

²² Paul warns against greed / covetousness 15x in his writings.

²³ In Ephesians 5:5, combining the thoughts of idolatry with sexual impurity and greed, Paul writes, ***"For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God."***

²⁴ Literally "mammon", an Aramaic word for wealth or gain.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, John wraps up his letter with this: **[1 John 5:21] Little children, guard yourselves from idols.**

There is not one mention of idolatry in the body of the letter.

This abrupt introduction of idolatry at the letter's conclusion has driven readers crazy. Why would John bring in the topic of idol worship at the very end and not develop the thought?

Well, in fact, John had been developing the thought all along. The bulk of this letter was written to teach who God is and to teach about His ways and to refute false teachings (*idolatrous* teachings about God and His ways).

John is warning us against being misled into the worship of any other kind of God than the God he has described. To do so would be to fall into idolatry.

Idolatry is the worship of anything other than God. Don't fall for an imitation.

We don't mind fake flowers. We might even stop off for some imitation food at a notoriously bad-for-you restaurant from time to time (although I haven't yet brought myself to eat beyond beef...). And Kathy and I now enjoy a fake Christmas tree.

But we can't live right without God - the real thing.

Conclusion:

The link between idolatry and covetousness/greed is strong and obvious. Maybe that's why the Ten Commandments God gave to guide the Jews began with a prohibition against idols and ended with a prohibition against covetousness.

When we give in to a desire to acquire more *stuff* and to be more in control, we may go to any lengths, violate anyone else's rights, and access any powers to get what we want.

Controlling greed is the essence of idolatry.

The Bible's prohibition against idols was not put in place because the authors of the Bible had something against art or creative expression.

It was put in place to point people to the only Source of meaning and purpose there is - the one, true God.

Imagine someone worshiping that which is not God, worshiping what he wrongly thinks God is like, or worshiping what he has made with his own hands or his own thoughts.

This delusion can only lead to disaster.

He'll be disappointed when his "god" doesn't offer comfort or hope when times get tough. And he'll be devastated when, in the end, his "god" doesn't provide salvation.

Greed/Idolatry robs God of the glory that is due Him AND it does terrible damage to the worshiper.

For God's sake and for your own sake, flee idolatry and worship and serve the one, true God.