

# 7 Sneaky Idols

**Introduction.** There are several Christians who travel to India for preaching work. They'll tell you they love the culture and the people. But one of the interesting sights in their travels is how common statues of idols were. India has hundreds of gods in Hinduism, and while you drive or walk along, you pass shrines with statues of one of those gods.

As people of the Western world, we don't see shrines and polytheistic gods dotting the landscape. But just because we may not have statues of gods on our streets or in temples, that doesn't mean we don't deal with idolatry.

What is an idol? An idol is worshipping the work of our own hands. Whether we make a physical idol or bow down to our own intellect and philosophy, we can participate in idolatry in a number of different ways.

In Genesis 35:2, Jacob told his household, "Put away the strange gods that are among you" (cp. Joshua 24:23; Isaiah 31:7; Ezekiel 14:6). From Jacob in Genesis to Ezekiel, hundreds of years later, the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, the tribes He delivered and protected, continued to go back to idolatry. And God kept trying to bring the people back to Himself.

Why is idolatry a big deal? First, because there's only one God, and to worship anything or anyone else is a lie. Second, worshipping other gods has an effect on our behavior. In Scripture, idolatry always coincided with oppressing the poor, violence toward the innocent, and sexual immorality.

We're going to discuss seven sneaky idols that inhabit churches and the hearts of Christians today. We should get rid of them today.

## ***I. Apathy/Indifference***

- A. In the parable of the soils, one of the plants was choked out and died because of the cares of this life and the distraction of wealth — not sexual immorality, drunkenness, or murder. Those sins are serious, but they didn't choke out the life of God and kill the gospel. The simple cares of this life did (Matthew 13:22).
- B. When Joshua was about to lead Israel into Canaan, part of the charge was to go to war with the enemies in the land, with giants and powerful armies (Joshua 1:9). A generation before, the fear of those giants caused the nation of Israel to shrink back and not fight, and that generation lost its promise (Numbers 13:31-14:4).
  1. We should take note. As disciples of Christ, we're now in a war between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness, a war for the souls of people.
  2. We're also called to be strong and bold (Ephesians 6:10), but the cares of life distract us from the fight, cause us to shrink back, and not take up our calling. The church has a mission. We've got to reject passivity and accept the purpose God has for us (1 Corinthians 16:13).
  3. It's very interesting to note that in our cultural moment, there's a lot of people who aren't returning to worship assemblies (general attendance is declining), not because they're angry at churches, but because of indifference.

4. As our culture has become more post-Christian, and as social media, apps, and YouTube have given people who don't attend more options than ever for spiritual growth, they've grown indifferent to in-person attendance.

## **II. "Follow Your Heart"**

- A. We hear it all the time: "Follow your heart. Do what you feel is right." Movies contain this theme, and songs celebrate this idea. We've come so far as to make it sacred. To disagree with someone's self-identity is tantamount to evil and hate.
- B. And "follow your heart" has entered churches. It has colored sermons, even going so far as dismissing or twisting verses that challenge it. The Bible is clear, however. The heart isn't the solution; it's the problem.
- C. Paul declared that there was nothing good in him, meaning his human nature (Romans 7:18). Paul could read this in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 17:9).
- D. Solomon remarked how people's hearts are full of evil, universally (Ecclesiastes 9:3). Jesus taught how we aren't made unclean by what's external to us; sin comes from our hearts — it emanates from within us (Mark 7:21-23).
- E. Thankfully, we weren't left there. Christ died and rose to change our hearts so we can be born again and live for Him. Instead of our hearts, we can now get revelation from the One who knows all and loves us through the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). Let's not follow our hearts but follow the Spirit.

## **III. Compromise**

- A. The Bible makes the transition to salvation as radical as possible. From death to life. From the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. From slavery to freedom.
- B. These are all metaphors where Scripture attempts to express the absolute gap between being children of wrath and children of God. Following Christ isn't a social club or self-help program. We have died to this world and been made alive in Christ (Galatians 5:24).
- C. Furthermore, we've been recruited to fight with love for people's souls through expounding the gospel and prayer and worship. There's no middle ground.
  1. In 1 Kings 12:25-33, Jeroboam compromised and introduced idolatry into the northern nation of Israel. He told the people that it would be more convenient, but it started them down a path that eventually led to their being taken away into Assyrian captivity (2 Kings 17:5-23, esp. vv. 7-12).
  2. As Jesus speaks to the seven churches of Asia, He told the Laodiceans that He knew their actions, that they were lukewarm. As a result, Jesus claims He will spit them out of His mouth (Revelation 3:15-16). He'd rather they be one or the other. Trying to find a middle ground in the war between God and Satan is worse than choosing a side.
- D. While there's room for personal conviction throughout the New Testament, there are enough clear teachings on belief and morality to challenge any person or culture. Often, we compromise out of fear or a false idea of love.
  1. It isn't love to compromise regarding sin (Ephesians 5:11). Sin destroys and kills, and love doesn't desire their destruction.

2. For some, living in certain countries, standing for God's truth means we'll pay a cost, even our very lives, and yet the Bible promises this won't be for nothing (Revelation 12:11). For our sake and others, we boldly stand for what is true, speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15).

#### **IV. *Reliance on Programs for Growth***

- A. Western churches, over the last several decades, have shown their love for programs. They've made classes or programs out of anything. They give it a snappy name and make a logo, book, and sell it on Amazon.
- B. There's nothing wrong with a program to help certain things work smoothly. But if we believe there's power in the program, it's difficult to let that go.
  1. What really works is never forgetting the charge to make disciples in Matthew 28:19-20.
  2. We know that Bible classes are good and right, but we need individual teaching like Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4:13-26). This simple exchange produced results (vv. 39-42).
- C. When Jesus arrived on Earth and started His work, the Jews had programs galore. They had traditions coming out of their ears. But they literally worshipped before a Holy of Holies absent of the Ark of the Covenant, the manifest presence of God.
- D. And when God in the flesh showed up, they rejected and killed Him. Let's not make the same mistake. This is God's work, and this means something eternal. Programs, names on a building, and more can be used, but realize that they're secondary to the work of proclaiming Christ (Psalm 127:1).

#### **V. *Leaders With Large Platforms***

- A. Just as denominational people love programs, they also love to put their leaders on a pedestal.
  1. Even our brethren are not immune to this. I've seen Christians completely enamored with men like Francis Chan, John Piper, Philip Yancey, Rick Warren, and Joel Osteen. Furthermore, I've see our brethren infatuated with men among us who are very talented and charismatic.
  2. Some men and women are especially talented as teachers and communicators, and we should acknowledge the talent, even admiring the person's commitment and faithfulness to using their talent when so many others would've quit.
  3. But we should celebrate the God who gave the talent, not the person He's using. Even a person's faithfulness is due to their reliance on the grace of God (1 Corinthians 15:10), not their own ability. The celebrity culture isn't meant for Christians, no matter how talented we are.
- B. It's always dangerous when an elder or preacher is propped up as a celebrity. Biblically, God "gave gifts to men," not to be the focus of the work, but to teach the church to do the work of the gospel (Ephesians 4:11-12).
- C. Even humans with amazing talents are fallible and capable of flaws, and we must discern whatever anyone says, not simply take it as true at face value (1 John 4:1).

- D. Additionally, leaders with big platforms can either compete or be a distraction from our commitment to Christ. We don't belong to a man or denomination or worldly organization. We belong to Christ alone (1 Corinthians 1:11-15).

## **VI. Emotionalism**

- A. Most people don't make decisions based on logic, despite what they say.
  - 1. Great ads make an emotional appeal. The ad might give facts regarding the product or service, but the appeal is emotional.
  - 2. Be better, feel better, be like that person or family, don't miss this opportunity, etc.
- B. People share ads that "made them cry" about families. The issue becomes when we do the same in the church. Our emotions were created by God and designed to exist within a relationship with him. The gospel isn't based on a singular emotional appeal, nor is it designed to make us happy.
- C. Happiness is temporary, a result based on stimuli. We are called to die to ourselves, take up our cross, and have true life (Matthew 16:25-26), the opposite of happiness. But having true, eternal life gives us God's joy, something no one can take away.
- D. When we teach the gospel or try to attract people to our churches with an emotional appeal, we're robbing them of the true gospel of self-sacrifice which will give them what their souls long for, eternal hope, joy, peace, and love.
- E. Emotionalism leads people to seek their own pleasure, which becomes what we call licentiousness (James 4:3-4). Our emotions are redeemed by following God and submitting to his revealed truth (2 Peter 2:19).

## **VII. Intellectualism**

- A. Some people are very smart. They have talent in processing information often difficult for others, or perhaps large amounts of it.
- B. Just as God has given us emotion, He gave us a brain, and we should exercise it with education. However, we have to be careful when dealing with the intellectual. Philosophy and academia have wrestled with the same questions for thousands of years, to no effect.
- C. Intellect alone can't bring us to truth. Paul understood this better than anyone.
  - 1. Probably the most educated of the apostles, he started out killing Christians with that big brain. It took the revelation of Jesus to correct him, not a better argument (Acts 26:14-19).
  - 2. Hence, when writing to the Corinthians, Paul explains how he didn't come to them with clever arguments. He didn't want their faith based on clever arguments but upon the person of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:1-2).
  - 3. This is after he explained how the Jews were offended by the cross (emotionalism) and the Greek philosophical culture thought the cross was stupid, so they both rejected Jesus (1 Corinthians 1:20-25).
- D. Even if we spend every moment of our lives learning information, our intellect is woefully limited. But our intellect can be renewed when we submit to the revelation of God who knows all and loves us (Colossians 2:8-10).

**Conclusion.** Father, help us to put away these idols and return to you and you alone. Christ is the only sure foundation for love and life, and His church is the holy temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:11-17).

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