

Idolatry
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10
Sermon by Dan Schrock
June 5, 2016

¹ Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

² We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, ⁵because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit,⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.

⁸For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. ⁹For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead— Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming. (NRSV)

I

I once knew a college student whose idol was reason and logic. He loved the life of his own mind, the way his brain could dance and leap from one idea to another idea. In a split second, he could spot the flaw in someone else's argument and tear it to shreds. He loved smashing other people's ideas to smithereens. Intellectual combat was his favorite sport, giving him joy surpassing anything the NBA or NFL could offer. True, he professed to be a follower of Jesus, but his real god—his real idol—was his own brain. What he worshiped most often, sometimes even at church, was not the God of the Bible, but the capabilities of his own mind. That is what he trusted. That is what he revered.

I once knew a middle-aged woman whose idol was her own family. Yes, she went to church and did everything good Christian people are supposed to do. But her real god was family life, particularly her two children and her husband. She listened to the daily broadcast of Focus on the Family. She consumed books on marriage and family life. What she craved more than anything else to have a perfect family. In this perfect family she and her husband would never disagree but would always be in sync with each other. In this perfect family her two children would always be obedient and respectful, would always

get good grades, and would learn to play the violin and piano with finesse. What she worshiped was this cherished image of the perfect family. In it she trusted. To it she looked for her happiness.

II

The Bible is passionate about the problem of idolatry. In the sequencing of the biblical story, God fingered the problem of idolatry very early in Israel's history. In fact, God identified the problem of idolatry at the very beginning of the Ten Commandments:

²I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ³you shall have no other gods before me. ⁴You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God . . .”

(Exodus 20:2-5a).

Yahweh, says this text, is a jealous God. Many years ago in other state I worked with a couple where the husband discovered his wife was in a relationship with another man. The husband discovered this in the most ordinary of ways, by coming home from work one day and listening to a message the other man had left on the answering machine. The husband was devastated. As the saga unfolded, the husband admitted that he was jealous. He did not want to be in a marriage where his wife was with another man. Well, God is like that husband. God is not happy when we turn something in our life into an idol. God is jealous. God does not want to share our affections and loyalties with other gods.

Israel's struggle against idolatry was long, intricate, and messy. The book of Judges tells how the Israelites would drift away from Yahweh and take up with other gods like Baal, the Canaanite storm god; or Asherah, the Semitic mother goddess. For this unfaithfulness, Yahweh would then allow Israel's enemies to overrun their land. The Israelites would cry out to God for mercy and deliverance. So God would send some champion—a judge—to fight off the enemy. For a while the Israelites would prosper and worship Yahweh. But then they'd slip into idolatry and the cycle would start all over

again. This pattern continued for centuries, and one of the key tasks of the prophets was to confront Israel's worship of idols.

The Old Testament prophets could get bitingly sarcastic about idols. In the 44th chapter of Isaiah, for example, the prophet writes about a carpenter who cuts down a cedar tree in the forest. The carpenter uses half the tree to build a wood fire for cooking his meal and keeping himself warm. Then he uses the other half of the tree to carve himself an idol. The carpenter bows down to this wooden idol, worships it, prays to it, and says, "Save me, for you are my god!" (44:17). Isaiah says this is ridiculous: the carpenter worships a hunk of wood from the same tree he uses for baking his bread (v. 15)!

III

The New Testament doesn't talk about idols as often as the Old Testament does. But we know from archaeology and ancient literature that the Roman Empire was saturated with the worship of other gods such as Jupiter and Venus, Isis and Mithras. In the streets of every Greco-Roman city you could find statues, temples, processions, and celebrations dedicated to these gods. Coins were stamped with images of the gods. Walk into a Greek or Roman home, and you'd likely find small statues to the household's favorite gods and goddesses. Worshiping these gods was so pervasive that Christians *had* to find ways of dealing with it. Whenever a Gentile wanted to become a follower of Christ, the church had to work with that person and help them renounce their allegiance to other gods.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul congratulates the Thessalonian church for turning away from idols and turning toward God, who is a "living and true God" (v. 9). For Paul this turn away from idols toward God is a mark of authentic faith in Christ.

IV

Maybe it seems that idolatry is no longer a pressing problem. After all, we Christians are committed to worshipping the God known to us in Jesus Christ. Besides, our

modern world no longer has idols standing around on the street corners. In downtown Goshen we don't see statues of Apollo, Diana, and Minerva like they saw every day in the Roman Empire. When we go to someone's house for dinner, we don't see our hosts burning incense on the fireplace mantle to an 8-inch figurine of the Egyptian god Osiris. We suppose we're beyond idolatry in our post-modern Western world.

Maybe idolatry today is more subtle, and because of that, more insidious. Maybe idolatry is worming its way into our lives and we just haven't opened our eyes to see it. To be sure, it's relatively easy to spot some of the idols other people worship in American society. In American society I think I see the idol of white supremacy; I think I see the idol of military power and violent solutions; I think I see the idol of wealth. But to see the specific idols in my own life? That's much harder.

And yet if we want to take idolatry as seriously as the Bible does, we will consider what idols we've erected in our own life. Idols aren't just obviously evil things like white supremacy; they can also be good things that we subtly begin to worship but shouldn't be worshiping. Recall that college student who turned his mind into an idol. A good mind is certainly a beautiful thing to have. Recall the mother who turned her family into an idol. Without question, a healthy family is something to be devoutly desired. But when we turn these good things into idols, we start looking for meaning and satisfaction in the wrong places. The effects on us can be insidious. Sooner or later, worshiping idols makes us restless. They make us feel that our life is thin and stretched out. In the long run, idols disappoint us because they have no ability to make us whole.

For example, if I make my spouse the center of my life and identity, I could become emotionally dependent, jealous, or controlling. If I make my family the center of my life and identity, I could end up living through my children until they resent me or until I have no life of my own. If I make my career the center of my life and identity, I could become a workaholic, not to mention boring and shallow. If I make possessions the center of my life and identity, I could be so scared of losing those possessions that I become an anxious wreck. If I make my rational mind the center of my life and identity, I could end up having very few warm relationships that mean much to me.

V

Let me return to that middle-aged woman I spoke of at the beginning who turned her family life into an idol. This woman, like most of us, had a hard time turning away from our idols and turning back toward God. What finally turned her toward God was a series of difficult experiences within her own family. Her son was caught by the police working in a meth lab, and he went to jail. Her daughter flitted from one boyfriend to another, unable to make a commitment to any of them. Her husband completely dropped out of church life. These and other difficult experiences taught her that even her own family members were deeply flawed people, far from perfect. With heartache and anguish, she turned to God for solace, knowing now in the depths of her soul that in all of heaven and earth we have none but God. She stopped trying to bargain with God. She quit demanding certain things from God. She dropped all conditions and requirements for what God must do in her family. Instead she simply gave all of herself to God without any qualifications or reservations.

That proved to be a turning point. Eventually she arrived in right relationship with the living and true God. She discovered in God satisfying, sustaining worship. She received inner contentment amid the ongoing challenges of life.

What about you?