

## IDOLS OF THE HEART

“Then some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down before me. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, ‘Son of man, these men have set up *idols in their hearts*, and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity...Any man of the house of Israel who sets up his *idols in his heart*...I the Lord will give him an answer in order to lay hold of the hearts of the house of Israel who estranged from Me through their idols’” (Ezekiel 14:1-5). In order to understand the importance and seriousness of this subject, we should understand how the word “heart” is used in Scripture. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* defines it as: “the center and seat of spiritual life, the mind as it is the fountain and seat of thoughts, passions, desires, appetites, affections, purposes, understanding and intelligence.” *Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives a fuller explanation of the use of the word: “The main organ of spiritual life, the place in man at which God bears witness of Himself. It comes to stand for the whole of the inner being of man in contrast to the external. Thus, the heart is supremely the one center in man to which God turns, in which the spiritual life is rooted.” Considering these definitions, we can readily see the gravity of setting up “idols in the heart.” Ezekiel is speaking to the people in Babylonian captivity. His message is God finds the exiles’ internalized idolatry as alienating as the overt paganism being conducted back home in the temple by the worshippers in Jerusalem (Ezk.8:6). The Biblical definition of idolatry is very broad. We are familiar with the first and second commandments that forbid the worship of any god but God, and the prohibiting of the making of graven images or any likeness of God. But the Scriptures goes beyond these two commandments when speaking of idolatry. Paul in Colossians 3:5 warns against “covetousness, which is idolatry.” He further states that “no covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the Kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph. 5:5). Here he associates idolatry with human greed, lust, and coveting. In the Old Testament (where passages abound with warnings against idolatry), Deuteronomy chapter 13 cites three cases of how one can be led into idolatry: By the false prophet (false teaching) (verses 1-5), by a private individual (verses 6-11), and by the city (the civil government) (verses 12-18). So, idols are not only pagan altars, carved images, or physical representations of God, but are found in the human heart and mind, as Ezekiel states.

Isaiah shows idol worship to be more than graven images or physical representatives of God by stating: “...you set a table for Fortune and fill cups with wine for Destiny” (Isa. 65:11). Israel’s idolatry in this case was not a physical image rather the spreading a table and filling cups of wine for a god. Fortune and Destiny are abstract ideas or mysterious forces to which they offered sacrifice by setting them a table and filling cups of wine. This is an example of setting up idols in the heart. The modern idols of Fortune and Destiny would be such abstract gods as good luck, chance, fate, fitness, success, and body beautiful. Paul refers to such things as “desires of the mind” (Eph. 2:3), and those who mind earthly things” (Phil 3:19), and further describes them as “the futility of the mind” (Eph. 4:17) and “the mind set on the flesh” (Rom. 8:7).

Idolatry, along with all sin, begins in the heart. Describing the sin of the pre-deluge in Noah’s day Genesis 6:5 states: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and every *imagination of the thoughts of his heart* was evil continually.” Jesus confirms this when he said: “The things that proceed out of the mouth comes from the heart, and these defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immorality, thefts, false witness, slanders” (Matt. 15: 18, 19). He further stated in Matthew 15:8: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far away from me, in vain they do worship me, teaching the doctrines and precepts of men.” The idols they had “set up in their heart” were their traditions of the past, the teachings and precepts of men, resulting in vain worship. One can have a heart filled with idolatry and still preach a good sermon, pray a beautiful prayer and lift the voice in heart-rendering songs and anthems. This is worship, but vain worship and idolatry of the heart. The idols we set up in our heart corresponds to our concept of the god being worshipped. The Psalmist states: “those who make idols (even an idol set up in the heart) will become like them. Everyone who trust them” (Ps. 115:8). This is echoed in Proverbs 23:7: “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” Jeremiah states: “they walked after emptiness and became empty” (Jer. 2:5). II Kings 17:15 says that Israel “followed vanity and became vain.” One of the problems Christian people have is they expect God to act as they think He should act. Their concept of God is not based upon His revelation in His son, Jesus Christ, but what they conceive in their heart He must be and do. As Dr. Gary North states in *The Sinai Strategy*: “All forms of idolatry are ultimately variations of self-worship, for it is man, as proclaimed sovereign being, who asserts the right to choose whom he will worship in place of God. Man, the sovereign, decides” not Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we do not need statues and images to be guilty of idolatry. Our most evil idol is not something seen, rather something we have developed in our heart. We want to reduce God to something we can handle. So, we have developed mental pictures, concepts, ideas, understandings, and traditions of God. Many modern church members have reduced faith to magic (even the Lord’s Supper can become a magic formula or ritual). Many believe and teach that if we confess the right confession, quote the right Scripture, think the right thought, God will respond. We turn the promise of God that He will sustain us in every difficulty into the demand that we have no difficulty. This is idolatry of the heart and will destroy us. When self permeates so much of what we do or not do, even in spiritual matters where self is supposed to be denied, it becomes a form of idolatry of the heart.

Two examples of what the Apostle Paul meant when he stated in Colossians 3:5 “covetousness (greed) is idolatry” is seen in two examples in the book of Acts, chapters 5:1-11: When Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and lied about it “Peter said ‘Ananias, why has Satan *filled your heart* to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back some of the price of the land?...why is it you have *conceived in your heart* this deed? You have not lied to man but to God.’” The consequence of this action was death. Chapter 8:9-24: When the “converted” Magician, Simon, “saw that the

Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the Apostles' hands, he offered them money saying, 'give this authority to me as well, so that everyone whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.'" This seems to be a reasonable request since he desired to emulate the Apostles, but he thought it could be bought with money. Yet he was probably more interested in the power and prestige it would bring to himself. This is typical of idols in the heart, greed and covetousness, which doesn't hesitate to use what is supposed to be spiritual in order to satisfy the flesh. "Peter said to him, 'May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! You have no part or portion in this matter for *your heart is not right with God.*'" In both cases, they had set up idols in their heart resulting in covetousness. William Barclay in his *Daily Bible Study Series* comments on the idolatry of covetousness: "It is a sin with a very wide range. If it is a desire for money, it leads to theft. If it is the desire for honor and prestige, it leads to evil ambition. If it is a desire for power, it leads to sadistic tyranny. If it is a desire for a person it leads to sexual sin. C.F.D. Moule well describes it as 'the opposite of the desire to give.' It is the desire to get—and always to get that which a man has no right to have." Many today, as in Ezekiel's day, even professing Christians have "set up this idol in their heart."

The most graphic description of the source and result of idols of the heart, is portrayed vividly by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1:18-32. G. K. Beale in *A Biblical Theology of Idolatry: We Become What We Worship*, concerning these verses, states: "This introductory section to Romans affirms that idol worship is the root of all other sins. When one turns from trust in God to trust in some part of God's creation, then the 'heart' becomes 'darkened' and all manner of sins follow from this." In reading these verses it seems as if Paul is describing a situation of moral degeneracy unlike anything known to man. Yet there is nothing in what the Apostle writes that is not found in our society today, and was typically seen in what the prophets of the Old Testament dealt with. In fact, many of the sins Paul writes about are the same ones the prophets continually warned the nation of Israel against. He even goes back to "the creation of the world" showing that God has been revealing His eternal power and divine nature through the things that have been made, leaving no excuse for man not knowing God and honoring Him as God. Instead they "became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened." (ver. 18-21).

"Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for corruptible man and of birds, and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (vers.22, 23). How could anyone today "set up in their hearts" such abominable idols? How about corruptible *man*? "Lincoln, Ford, Edsel, Dodge, Chrysler, Honda, Buick" *Four-footed animals*? "Cougar, Mustang, Pinto, Rabbit." *Birds*? "Falcon, Skylark, Firebird." *Crawling creatures*? "Cobra, Viper, Bug."

In verses 24-32 the wrath and judgment of God is described in the phrase "God gave them over..." It is not only in the last day of judgment that God brings punishment upon sin; it is in the present day that those who have "suppressed the truth in unrighteousness" (ver. 18) are punished with a severe punishment that it is not seen as judgment by those who have "set up idols in the heart." Rather their heart is so darkened they cannot see they are fools and all the while "profess to be wise" (ver. 22). The most devastating punishment one can endure is for God to

give them over to do anything they want to do and become anything they want to become. The Psalmist said in Psalm 115:8: "Those who make idols will become like them, every one of them." And Hosea 8:4 states "With their silver and gold they make idols for their own destruction." This says judgment is inseparable from idolatry. Human actions have moral consequences. God has established moral accountability for man's actions. The love of money (idol of mammon) destroys those who worship at its alter (I Tim. 6:9, 10). The idol of sex becomes the instrument of death to those who bow before it (Rom.1:27). The decision to deny the true God results in a depraved mind (Rom. 1:28).

In the terrible statement "God gave them over," used three times in this passage, we have a commentary on verse 18: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." "Giving them over in the lust of their hearts in impurity" (ver.24), "Giving them over to degrading passions" (ver.26), and "giving them over to a depraved mind" (ver.28) is a harsh punishment God has rendered "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" although they do not accept or even recognize they are under the judgment of God. This is because the idols in their heart are idols of speculations and are foolish, resulting in a darkened heart (ver. 21), a lustful and impure heart (ver.24), and a depraved heart (ver. 28). Yet, they, being blind to the judgment of God, take "pleasure in unrighteousness" (II Thess. 2:12), and are lovers of pleasure rather than the lovers of God, holding a form of godliness although they have denied its power" (II Tim. 3:4, 5).

Idolatry is basically exchanging the worship of the living God for a worship of any obsession our heart desires. Three times in Romans one the "idolatry of the heart" is described as an "exchange." They *exchanged* the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and animals (verse 23). "Therefore, God gave them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them" (ver.24). A false image of God leads to the enthronement of the god of illicit sex in the heart. We are not told the kind of immorality Paul has in mind. Only the *degrading of their bodies with one another*. The next *exchange*: "They *exchanged* the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (ver. 25). This is idolatry of the heart, transferring worship from God to things created. "For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions" (ver.26) and this leads us to the third *exchange*: "women *exchanged* the natural function for that which is unnatural, and the same way men abandoned the natural function the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their persons the due penalty of their error" (ver.27). The last time it is stated that "God gave them over" is verses 28-32. "And Just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper..." He then shows how a depraved mind leads to a whole variety of evil practices that are dealt with throughout the Scriptures. Verse 32 states: "although they know the ordinance of God, those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same but give hearty approval to those who practice them. Charles Hodge in *A Commentary on Romans* states: "Dark as the picture here is drawn, it is not so dark as that presented by most distinguished Greek and Latin authors, of their own countrymen."