

STUDY 9 - DON'T MAKE IDOLS

Commandment 2: 'Do not make idols of any kind, whether in the shape of birds or animals or fish. You must never worship or bow down to them, for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God who will not share your affection with any other god! I do not leave unpunished the sins of those who hate me, but I punish the children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generations. But I lavish my love on those who love me and obey my commands, even for a thousand generations.' (Exodus 20:4-6)

The first two commandments cover how we worship God; the First Commandment deals with whom we worship as God and the Second Commandment deals with how we worship God. In fact, this second commandment is more concerned with how we are *not* to worship God.

In our twenty-first-century Western world we are inclined to think of idolatry as a Stone Age crime; something that *we* have evolved beyond. Yet, as has been widely pointed out, *homo sapiens* is a worshipping species, and our hearts, minds and lives all too readily find something other than the one true and living God to bow down before. That idolatry is a real risk is apparent from the Bible; there are more references to this commandment in its pages than to any other.

→ 1 STARTER

Discuss either of the following:

A) Have each group member take one of the following substitutes and briefly outline their advantages over the real thing.

- Plastic flowers.
- A good computer simulation of a car racing competition.
- A robotic dog.
- Fake pearls.

- Online virtual friends.
- Playing a CD of a concert.
- An exercise bike.
- Watching a TV soap (rather than getting involved in the real world).
- A software program that makes your computer look like a fish tank.
- Online shopping.
- Watching the big match on TV.

B) A hundred years ago what was the most splendid building in your town or city? What is the largest recent building in your town today? Do you feel that this says anything about your town?

→ 2 SURGERY

Discuss one of the following:

A) If you were allowed to make up your own religion, what rewards, promises and requirements would it include? How would you have God behave towards you?

B) Many people are seriously discontented with their lives. What are the causes of this discontent?

→ 3 STUDY

This is divided into an Old and a New Testament part.

The Old Testament

A) Read Exodus 20:4-6.

- From verses 4 and 5, what seems to be the definition of an idol?
- Why would someone bow down before something they had made? What sort of justification might they make for this practice?
- God describes himself as jealous for our affection.
 - *In what sort of human situation today might we hear of people 'being jealous for someone's affection'? Is that comparable to God's relationship to us?
 - *Why do you think God is jealous? For his good? Or for our good?
- What, according to verse 5, appears to be the alternative to worshipping (or loving) God? Can't we be allowed to be somewhere halfway between the two?
- Do you see God 'punishing the children' as a statement of vindictiveness or as a statement that sin has a domino effect -its results echo on for generations?
- Do you think that this is an irreversible curse?
- How long is a thousand generations? What does a comparison of verses 5 and 6 suggest about God's character?

B) Read Exodus 32:4-9. Note that the Israelites had only just left Egypt where the gods were often represented by animals.

- Moses had been gone for weeks up the mountain. What do you think was the mood amongst the people?
- As Moses' deputy, how do you imagine Aaron felt? Why do you suppose he made an image? How do you think he would have justified what he did?
- Do you think the ensuing worship was pagan, Jewish or mixed?
- What is God's verdict on the episode?

C) There are many passages in the Old Testament prophets that talk about the sin of idolatry. Read Jeremiah 10:1-16.

- What are the idols unable to do (*vv.4-6*)?
- What, in comparison can the LORD do?
- Why, when they are so feeble, do you think people worshipped idols?

Idolatry can, however, be subtle, as two examples in the Old Testament make clear.

D) Read Numbers 21:4-9 and 2 Kings 18:1-4.

- How had the bronze snake been a blessing in the past?
- How should it have been treated? What happened instead? Why?
- What does Hezekiah do to it?
- Can you think of a situation where an object or institution that brought blessing in one generation became dangerously idolized later?

E) Read 1 Samuel 4:1-11. The Ark was the chest where the Ten Commandments and other symbols of the covenant were kept. Much earlier, in the battles for the conquest of the Promised Land, it had often accompanied the armies.

- What was the Ark supposed to signify to the Israelites?
- How was the Ark viewed here (*v.3*)?
- How has the Ark become an idol?
- What lessons are there for us here?

The New Testament

On the surface there is little relevant to the issue of idolatry in Jesus' ministry and teaching. After being exiled because of their idolatry the Jews had learned their lesson and were strictly opposed to any form of image that could be idolatrous. But idolatry can occur without images ...

A) Read Matthew 6:24.

- What does Jesus say here is impossible?
- *Why* is it impossible?
- Why does money make such a potent idol?

B) As we saw earlier the most dangerous idols can come from 'holy things'. In discussion with a Samaritan woman about the right place of worship, Jesus makes a crucial prophecy. Read John 4:19-24. Note: Jews and Samaritans differed over where the acceptable site to worship God was.

- What, says Jesus in v.21, is going to happen to affect the status of these places of worship?
- Jesus points out that it is the right manner of worship not being in the right place, that is the most important thing. What definition of 'right worship' does he give?
- What does this suggest about *how* we worship?

C) The issue of idolatry surfaces later in John's gospel, just after Lazarus is raised from the dead. Read John 11:45-53.

- What, according to verse 48, is the fear of the Pharisees?
- What should have been their response to what Jesus has done?
- What do they end up putting before their own Messiah?
- How could it happen that ensuring the survival of a religious system came before Christ?
- Did this form of idolatry die out in the first century or is it still a danger?

D) Once the church had spread into the Roman and Greek world it came face to face with widespread idolatry. Read Acts 17:16-31. Paul is on an unplanned trip to Athens.

- What is Paul's attitude to the idols around the city (v.16)?
- Why does he say that idolatry is wrong (vv.24,29)?
- Why, according to Paul, is the age of tolerating idols now over?

E) Read Colossians 3:5.

- What, according to this verse, is idolatry?
- How are we to deal with it?

F) Read 1 John 5:21 (NJV, or NLT footnote).

- Why do you think the Apostle John considers idolatry so serious that he ends his letter with a warning against it?

→ 4 SUMMARY

Think about how we can *make idols*

- Do we put things other than God first in our lives?
- Do we have an inadequate idea of who God is? Do we limit him?
- Do we try to make God into the sort of God that we want him to be?
- Are there rituals in the way we worship that we feel are especially 'holy'?

Think about how *we can worship the real God*

- Are we able to recognize God's gifts, and to praise the Giver, not the gift?
- Are we content with letting God do what he wants to do? Or have we limited him?
- Do we let Scripture control our view of who God is?

Discussion

- Why does God not like us to try and make an image of him? If we could make an idol the size of the universe would it be more acceptable?
- God is concerned that we have a 'right-sized' God. Is that for our benefit or his?
- Some Christian counseling methods suggest that, in difficult circumstances, we try and imagine Jesus sitting or standing next to us. Is this idolatry?
- How do we distinguish between having appropriate reverence for, say, the Bible or Communion without making idols out of them?

So what?

At the end of this study:

- What has challenged you most?
- In what areas are you most vulnerable?
- What attitude or action do you need to change?

→ 5 STEPPING OUT

Practical suggestions

- Praise is one way of reminding ourselves who God really is, and the best antidote to idolatry. This is probably why so many of the passages of the prophets that attack idols do so in the context of praise for God's greatness (i.e. the Jeremiah 10 passage looked at earlier). Take time out with the Psalms.
- Do a spiritual audit. When you have spare moments, what does your mind drift to? What do you spend your money on? These questions probably point to where your heart lies. You may need to work at destroying your idols!
- Ask yourself this: Whom do I serve? Who controls me? If the answer is not God then you ought to look hard and prayerfully at how you live.

Further study

A) Read Deuteronomy 4:15-29.

- According to verses 15 and 16, why is trying to make an image of God a mistake?
- What, according to verse 23, will be the serious consequences of making idols?
- In verse 29, what hope is held out to idol worshippers?

B) Read Isaiah 44:6-20 (preferably in a modern version such as the NLT which captures the sarcasm) .

- What do we learn about who the LORD is in verses 6-8?
- What, in contrast, are idols? Why is worshipping them futile?

C) In a brief passage in 1 Corinthians Paul touches on idol worship. Read 1 Corinthians 10:19-26.

- What does Paul say that these idols are *not*?
- What does he say that they are?
- What practical implications does he draw for the Corinthians in their pagan culture?

D) Read 1 Timothy 6:15-16 and John 14:8-11.

- What reasons does Paul give to Timothy as to why we cannot make an image of God?
- How does Jesus fulfill the need for us to have any such image?

Questions to think about

- Should church windows have stained-glass images?
- Should actors play Jesus in films?
- Imagine someone becomes a Christian in a household where there are real idols; what should he or she do?
- The goals set by a government tend to be those of employment and economic growth rather than righteousness. Are these idolatrous?
- You are a church leader in another country. A number of short-tempered and muscular men with dark glasses draw your attention to the fact that the picture of the President is not to be found in the church. What do you do?

For prayer

- Pray that we may honor God, and only God.
- Pray that we would be able to discern what the idols are in our lives and how best to deal with them.
- Pray that the leaders of our land would seek God's kingdom and his righteousness for our nation.