

The gods We Worship

“Part 1: A City Full of Idols”

Text: Acts 17:16-21

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 29, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Acts 17.
- Who can forget the opening scene from *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*? Indiana, the famed treasure hunter and archeologist, has successfully made it through all the traps in the ancient Peruvian temple. He stands in front his prize – **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** a golden idol representing the goddess of fertility.
 - Fearing that a booby trap will be released when he picks up the idol, Indiana swiftly replaces the idol with a bag of sand. **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** It doesn't work. The whole temple begins to collapse. The opening scene ends in epic fashion with Indiana Jones clutching his idol as he outruns a giant boulder **(SHOW SLIDE 4)**.
- Idolatry is by far the most frequently discussed problem in the Bible. It is not a fringe issue. Idolatry takes centre stage. What may surprise you however is that Bible says idols are not simply worshipped on the alters of ancient and uncivilized tribes. It says idols are worshipped in the hearts of contemporary civilized urban people like us. In fact, the Bible sums up all the problems of humanity, whether ancient or modern, in terms of idolatry. Romans 1 says,
 - ***“For although [humanity] knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened...They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.”***
 - Do you see it? We were created to worship and serve God *and* to rule over creation. But we reversed the natural order of things. We turned away from worshipping our Creator to worship created things. Instead of ruling creation we are in turn ruled by creation. The false gods we worship end up devouring their devotees.
- Do you see how practical this going to get then? The Bible declares that under all the sins you struggle with and under all your relational breakdowns is enslavement to idols. Under all societal breakdowns such as social injustice, addictions, divorce, dishonesty, and war is the worship of false gods.
 - The key to deliverance is outlined in our text. First, we must see the idols. That is, we must understand what idolatry is. You cannot resist what you do not recognize. Second, we must confront the idols. That is, we must expose the idols of our day showing how they always fail. Finally, we must reject the idols.
 - So let's introduce the series today with those three things: see the idols, confront the idols, and reject the idols.

SEE THE IDOLS

- First then, **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** see the idols. **READ 16** - *Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.*
 - Paul was visiting the great city of Athens. Athens was famous for how culturally sophisticated it was. From Athens came the great intellectuals like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Athens started democracy and greatly valued the arts. The Parthenon still captivates people to this day.
- So what was Paul's reaction as he toured the cultural capital of the ancient world? We read, “his spirit was provoked within him.” It is what a husband feels when he sees another man moving in on his wife. What Paul saw was not a city filled with grandeur and glory but a city flooded with idols.
 - Pliny, the ancient Roman historian, says that there were 30,000 public statues besides the countless private ones in people's homes. In the Parthenon stood a huge gold and ivory statue of Athena. The gods of Olympus were all there: Apollo, Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, and Zeus.

- Now why would Paul get so upset about statues? Aren't they just works of art? Is Paul a crass and uncultured man? No, Paul was a man of massive intellect, thoroughly educated, cultured, and sophisticated. So what is the problem? It is not the art that is the problem but what the art says about the people.
 - The word 'saw' means that Paul could see underneath what he observed with his eyes. He saw a city filled with false gods. If we are going to see the idols of our day we must learn to see as Paul saw. So let's ask the most important question then: what is an idol?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** The first thing we must see is that idols are more than physical statues. The reason modern people do not think idolatry is a problem is because we think of idols in Indiana Jones terms. We think of people bowing in Eastern Temples. We think of jungle tribes on the Discovery Channel bowing before a wooden figurine.
 - Now if you give this even a moment's thought you know it is far too simplistic. Before a sculptor carves an idol he must first have an image in his mind of what he wants to carve. Before anyone shapes a statue with their hands, it is first shaped in the imagination of their mind.
 - That is why God said to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 14, ***"Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts."*** Do you see it then? The first thing we learn is that **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** an idol is whatever holds ultimate place in our hearts. The reason people carve statues is because they are trying to represent physically what their hearts already hold in ultimate esteem.
- But there is a second thing we must see. This will open your eyes to see as Paul did. **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** The second thing you must see is that idols are created from good things, not evil things.
 - Let me show you what I mean. When Paul toured Athens he would have seen a statue of Aphrodite – the goddess of physical beauty. Is physical beauty an evil thing? No, God is the creator of beauty and beauty is therefore inherently good. But when a man or woman lives for their physical appearance, when they spend huge amounts of money on it and evaluate their entire self-worth on their looks then beauty has been deified. Beauty, a good thing, has become Aphrodite.
 - But all false gods will fail us. Aphrodite is cruel goddess. She devours all who worship her, always demanding that you pursue her more, but never delivering on the promise that beauty will make you have value. In the end she laughs as age consumes the beauty of youth. She is a god who fails.
 - Or take another goddess Paul would have seen – Artemis who became the goddess of business. Is business an evil thing? Absolutely not. God created us to work. But when making money becomes the obsession of a person's life money becomes deified. In ancient times you sacrificed to Artemis if you wanted to get rich. There was even child sacrifice.
 - As one man says Artemis still demands child sacrifice today for if you want to make a lot of money then you have to sacrifice your family. This does not mean that a Christian avoids the financial world. It means we must keep money as money, not as a god.
- Tim Keller takes these two concepts and provides us with one definition of idolatry. **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** Idolatry is making a good thing into an ultimate thing. Or we could say idolatry is taking a good thing and making it into a god thing. It is taking part of the created order and elevating it to God status.
 - You can see then why the Athenians made everything into an idol. They had so many gods because anything can become a god – family, career, romance, or relaxation can all become the ultimate thing we live for instead of God himself.

- So Keller writes that an idol **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** *“is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give...an idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”*¹
 - But as we have seen and will see, false gods always fail. They enslave and devour those who obey them. We become like Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, caressing the ring believing that the precious will make us happy when all the while it is consuming us.
 - Elyse Fitzpatrick shows how idols dehumanize and destroy us: She writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** *“If you passionately desire the respect of others, then your life will be colored by the fear of man. You’ll worship other people’s opinions. If you intensely crave acceptance, you’ll be terrified of loneliness and rejection. You’ll serve gods of man pleasing, peer pressure, or codependency. If you covet comfort, pleasure, or fun, you’ll worship money or prestige as gods who hold the power to bless or curse you.”*²
- The good news of the Bible is that Jesus came to liberate us from false gods and give us the satisfaction we have so long desired. The first step to liberation is seeing the idols – seeing that an idol is anything that takes the place of God in our hearts. It is a good thing made into a god thing. See the idols.

CONFRONT THE IDOLS

- In the second place we must **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** confront the idols.
 - After Paul saw the city was full of idols we read that he confronted them. In verse 17 we read **READ 17** - *So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.* What did talk them about? Well we get a taste of it in the speech he gives in verse 22-31. **READ 22-31.**
 - *So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for “ ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, “ ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’ ²⁹ Being then God’s offspring offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. ³⁰ The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹ because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”*
 - What is Paul doing? He is confronting the idols by declaring that they are false. He is declaring that there is only one true God and that He alone is worthy of our worship because he created us and sustains us. His message to the people is summarized in Acts 19. Paul taught them *“that man-made gods are no gods at all.”*
- So in order that we might be liberated from the false gods of our day, let’s confront a few of our idols. Let’s confront two personal idols and two cultural idols.

¹ Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xvii, xviii.

² Elyse Fitzpatrick, *Idols of the Heart*, 138.

PERSONAL IDOLS

- **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** The first personal idol is approval - the need for approval from other people.
 - The desire to be accepted is a good thing. God created us for relationship and we are called to act in ways that foster relationships. People who do not care what anyone thinks of them are self-centred and will end up all alone cursing the cruel world. But this good desire for approval can easily become an idol. How can you see if approval has become your god?
 - You can see it when someone criticizes you and you find yourself falling apart emotionally. You can see it if your greatest nightmare is rejection. You can see it when you act like a coward because you are too afraid to risk disapproval. You can see it when you hide the fact that you are a Christian because others might look down on you. You can see it if you exaggerate a story to make yourself look good. The reason so many people lie is because they want to look good to gain approval or not to lose it. Only the gospel can confront and defeat this powerful idol. More on that later.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** The second personal idol is sex.
 - God created sex. Sex is good. Everywhere the Bible celebrates sex as a good gift to be enjoyed between a man and woman in marriage. But when sexual pleasure becomes the driving force of a person's life then sex has become a god. Sex has become Eros – the god of eroticism. But Eros never delivers on his promises.
 - For all the promises of satisfaction that Eros makes, he always leaves us unsatisfied. Sugar is a good thing but you cannot eat a bowl of sugar for your meals. This unsatisfied desire tells us that our souls are meant for something more – that only God can truly satisfy us.

CULTURAL IDOLS

- So those are two personal idols. Let's turn now to confront two cultural idols that are totally different from each other.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** The first cultural idol to confront is sports.
 - I love sports. Once again, sport is a good thing. God created our bodies to do great things. God created play, recreation, and the joy of entertainment. But sports can easily become the thing people live for.
 - What are people most passionate about on Sunday mornings in Victoria? Is it worshipping Jesus or sports? I can see it becoming an idol in my own life when I am more excited in the morning to look up last night's scores than I am to read my Bible. I can see it becoming an idol when guys can tell me how many goals Wayne Gretzky scored when he was eight but cannot say if Habbakuk comes before or after Nahum, let alone what Habbakuk is about. I often think that the church would leap forward if guys were half as passionate about reaching the world for Christ as they are about sports.
 - It's the non-sports people that often confront the idolatry of sport. After Tiger Woods got caught in all his affairs a few years ago I read an article that imagined what people will say about us 1000 years from now when they dig up our history. ***"They will turn at each other in disbelief and say: 'their god was a golfer'...they will say that we lived in a time when our admiration for men who plunk white balls in holes with thin clubs, who smack rubber discs at each other on a sheet of ice, who wear baggy shorts and drop round balls into nets...who carry a leather oval across a field while being chased, they will say that our rush to treat these men as gods is to test the bounds of societal respect."***³
 - Does this mean we forsake sports? No. It is not sport that is evil. It is the place that sport is given in the hearts of people that is evil. The answer is not to get rid of sports but

³ Shelley Fralic, "Lying Cheaters show us – again – why athletes are not role models," *The Vancouver Sun*, December 16, 2009, A1.

to de-god it. Sports, like all good things, must be put in its rightful place as a gift of God to be enjoyed but never to be the thing that consumes us.

➤ **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** The second cultural idol is nature.

- We are so blessed to live in Canada. There was a great commercial a few years ago that said, ***“we have more square feet of awesomeness per person than any other nation on earth.”*** This is particularly true of the Westcoast with its soaring mountains, awe-inspiring coastlines, and majestic forests. Everywhere the Bible calls us to celebrate nature, enjoy nature, steward nature, and let it inspire our hearts so that we might praise the Creator. The Bible makes a clear separation between the Creator and the creation. But in the spirituality of the Pacific Northwest the Creator gets merged with the creation. God is viewed as being in all things, especially nature. Nature then takes on divine properties and experiencing nature means experiencing the divine.
 - In his book on the spirituality of Westcoast people, writer Douglas Todd rightly points out that ***“geography shapes spirituality...many people...find sacredness in the wild, wet, and imposing landscape...many feel spiritual when they experience oneness with nature, in effect practicing a form of earth reverence.”***⁴
 - Perhaps the best example of this occurred a few years ago when the blockbuster movie *Avatar* was released. This movie is Westcoast spirituality in a nutshell. On the lush planet of Pandora the indigenous people have learned to live in harmony and peace with nature because they know that the life force of the goddess Eywa is in everything. The ultimate spiritual experience takes place when, together, they merge their individual consciences with the earth and therefore with life force of Eywa.
- Does this mean that Christians do not believe in caring for the environment? Not at all. Christians should be the first to care for the earth because we believe God gave it to us to steward. But as Christians we must always keep the Creator/creation distinction in mind.
- Confronting the idolatry of nature means putting nature in its rightful place. Creation exists to declare the glory of God. We rightly glorify God when we look upon the splendour of the Westcoast and let it lift our hearts in praise to the Creator.

REJECT THE IDOLS

- So first we must see the idols. Second we must confront the idols. Now let me wrap this up very quickly with the third thing: **(SHOW SLIDE 17)** reject the idols.
- We see here at least two reasons to reject the idols. **(SHOW SLIDE 18)** First, we should reject them because a day of judgment is coming. ***READ 29-31 - Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.***³⁰ ***The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent,***³¹ ***because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”***
 - We are all guilty of the greatest crime in the universe. We have rejected our Creator and served created things. We have valued a good image, career accomplishments, and the pleasure of sex over our Creator. As our Creator, God commands us to repent – that is to turn away from false gods to worship and serve Him.
 - We must do this because a day is coming when God will judge all people through Jesus, the resurrected and reigning king.

⁴ Douglas Todd, *Cascadia – the elusive utopia*, picture caption prior to chapter 4.

- **(SHOW SLIDE 19)** Second, we should reject the idols because only God can satisfy our souls.
 - How does Paul get them to reject their idols? What does he talk about? **READ 18** - *Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, “What does this babbler wish to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities”—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection.*
 - The resurrection of Jesus proves that all God did for sinners in Christ is a reality. The resurrection proves that Jesus death was efficient to forgive sins, efficient to have sinners accepted before God, and efficient to gain eternal life with God. You see the heart only releases its grip on an idol when it is captivated by what God has done for us in Jesus.
- When you see that God has set his love on you, sent his Son to die for you, that nothing can separate you from his love, then needing the approval of others will lose its power. The resurrection of Jesus proves that you have God’s full approval. When this truth sinks deep into your soul it frees you shackles of having to earn the approval of others.
 - When you see that because of what Jesus did God has taken you as his bride, that you have worth in his eyes, and that because of Jesus He views you as perfectly beautiful then you are free from trying to build up your self-worth through your physical appearance.
 - When you look at the resurrection you are freed from the empty promises of sex. Why? Because in the resurrection you have God’s proof that he has earned for you eternal pleasure that far outweigh anything on earth. When this pleasure fills you the false promises of Eros lose their power.

CONCLUSION

- In the weeks to come we will have a lot more to say on how identify and dethrone your idols but listen, the only way to defeat them is with the gospel. The gospel exposes false gods for what they are and captivates your heart so that idols lose their power. So glory in what Jesus did for you. Read of it. Study it. Pray it. Sing it. See the idols, confront the idols, reject the idols.