

“I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, ‘Let Jesus be cursed!’ and no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12.3)

I will never forget the night in 2007 when my mom and I were surprised by an unexpected guest in our house. We were sitting on the couch in the living room, watching the TV, when suddenly a mouse went scurrying through the room right in front of us. I will never forget it because of the drama that followed, and also that we were watching “American Idol” that night. And I could hardly watch another episode after that for fear that another mouse would run through my living room. Mice aside, that show opened a new era of reality competitions to world audiences. Thousands of people competing to be an “idol”, a celebrity, somebody that others look up to.

We in the Western world have a curious relationship to this concept of an “idol” as somebody to be acclaimed. We choose people we want to emulate when we get older, we raise them up on a pedestal, and – especially in the context of celebrity – we worship them. I’m sure you see where I’m going with this. To say we don’t, as a culture, practice idolatry would be outright blindness. And today’s lessons each address the danger of idols and how they can harm our relationship with God.

While I have just described our cultural notion of an idol, and while in the Bible we may think of an idol purely as a bronze or gold-cast image of a god that we worship – something like the golden calf of Exodus – an idol can really be *anything* in our lives that distract us from God. St. Augustine defined an idol as “worshipping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshipped.” Per this definition, if we to worship a fork because it gives us food, that it idolatry. Theologian James K.A. Smith wrote a book titled *You Are What You Love*, where he argues that where we place our love, *what* we worship, helps to define who we are. Do we love God? Well, do we worship God? If not, *what do* we worship? When we start to ask ourselves that question, we can soon realize that there is so much else in the world that commands our attention. We may love to watch the news, to read gossip magazines, to obsessively scroll Facebook, to watch TV, to garden, to play in the stock markets, the lists go on and on and on. But, do these activities distract us from God? If they do, and they normally always do, then we are committing idolatry because it’s so easy for us to put *anything* before God these days.

The idols in our lives are so commonplace that it might be hard for us to even identify them. In our modern world, we have so many objects that might be idols. It might be our phones, it might be our TV, it might be our books, our car, our clothes. It might even be our friends or our families. What is the relationship of the things we love to God?

Despite how I just listed off mostly *objects*, it is also true that *concepts* can be idols as old as time itself. Security, especially *financial* security and wealth, are always at the fore of our minds, just as they have been for thousands of years. But, do these object or conceptual idols misplace our love for God? If I am interpreting Jesus correctly, my answer would be “yes – always”. We are always putting things before God, and that is a common theme in the Gospels. Think, for example, of the parable of the great banquet: the king (or wealthy man) throws a grand dinner, and every guest comes up with an excuse not to attend despite being invited. This parable is as much a commentary on our idolatrous nature as it is a description of God’s wide open invitation to His kingdom.

So, what do we worship? Our lessons for today exhort us to worship only God – not anything else – or we are putting ourselves and our eternal souls in danger.

In our Old Testament lesson from the Prophet Jeremiah, the Lord speaks in no uncertain terms about the dangers of worshipping idols. “Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, ‘We are safe!’—only to

go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight?"

Have you ever done that? Have you gone and done all sorts of things contrary to God's command, but then stopped into church to feel good, and then return to it? I know I've done that before. Here, the Lord (through the prophet Jeremiah) promises a terrible wrath to those who think that's acceptable. "I am watching, says the Lord", as he foretells the destruction of Jerusalem. "Therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh." Just because the Temple is there doesn't mean God's wrath is any less abated due to the sins of the Israelites.

Fast forward to Jesus overlooking the city of Jerusalem, it's a very similar scene to that which we read in Jeremiah. Jesus looked at the city and pronounces condemnation against it. And when Jesus went into the temple to cleanse it, he was purging the place of worship to God of those who were instead worshipping the idols of money and richness in the very place which was called God's house. One important difference occurs in this narrative from that of Jeremiah, though – that difference is that Jesus wept for the city. That Jesus weeps before the inevitable wrath of God is a display of compassion – that he is heartbroken for the idol worship taking place – that he'd rather not do what he must do.

Jesus's death and resurrection, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, has changed the ability to discern idols, though. St. Paul tells the Corinthian converts to Christianity that before, when they were pagans, they worshipped idols that could not speak, but now they worship a God who does speak. For anyone who professes that Jesus is Lord must be speaking by the Holy Spirit, whereas anyone who says "Let Jesus be cursed" is clearly not speaking by the Spirit. The Spirit enables many great gifts that can only be activated by God, whereas worshipping idols does not allow for a love of Jesus. We still worship many idols that do not speak the truth – in fact most of our surroundings are working to pull us away from the confession that Jesus is Lord. And the more we give to idols, the more they demand of us. But they do not speak the truth to us.

God, however, does speak to us. He does give us his demands upfront and clear. And, this can be difficult because God might demand from us something we don't want to hear. In fact, he often does. When we hear the words of Jesus saying to forgo all worldly wealth, it combats our attachment to money and financial security. When we hear the words of Jesus tell his disciples to abandon their family and follow him, it fights with our deepest instincts to love our family. When Jesus says take up your cross and follow me, we look towards the possibility of death with fear of leaving our safety behind. When Jesus says all these things, we get an idea of what God meant when he says worship no other God but me. What a demand this is, and we truthfully don't know what to do with that in our modern context.

But Jesus shows us that God has compassion, mercy, and love. What's more important than accumulating earthly wealth and possessions is the love of one's neighbour and the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. We must worship God at all times, and him first. He is to be our first love, the end to which all means lead. If we can focus our love to him and let go of all the idols we carry in our lives, then we will be given the gifts of the Spirit, and the promise of eternal life. And we must pray. Pray without ceasing. And, as we pray in our Collect, we pray for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to ask only for the things which please God.

Going back to our cultural notion of an idol, we have a saying: "you should never meet your heroes." Why? Because something inevitably goes wrong, or the bubble of their fame might pop. The fact holds true that earthly idols, no matter what – or who – they are, will *always* let us down. That is why the only person worthy of our attention and worship is Jesus Christ, and his heavenly father.

May the God of compassion walk with us in our earthly pilgrimage and may his Spirit guide us towards the true goal of our life: to please him in all we do and say, and to love him with all of our being.