

Q17: What is Idolatry?

Idolatry is trusting in created things rather than the Creator for our hope and happiness, significance and security.

Romans 1:21 and 25

For although they 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 about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator.

Commentary

What is it to have a god? Or, what is one's god? Answer: To whatever we look for any good thing and for refuge in every need, that is what is meant by "god"...it is the trust and faith of the heart, nothing else, that make both God and an idol.... To whatever you give your heart and entrust your being, that...is really your god.... Many a person imagines that he has God and everything he needs, provided he has money and property. He relies upon these, boasts about them, and feels...immovably secure.... But look, he too has a god, named mammon, that is the money and property to which he has given his whole heart. Mammon is the world's favorite idol. One who has money and property has a sense of security and feels...happy and fearless.... On the other hand, one who has nothing is as insecure and anxiety-ridden as if he had never heard of God.... Similarly, one who congratulates himself on his great learning, intelligence, power, special advantages, family connections, and honor and trusts in them also has a god, only not the one true God. The evidence for this appears when people are arrogant, secure, and proud because of such possessions, but desperate when they lack them or lose them. I repeat, to have a god means to have something on which one's heart depends entirely.

So now you can easily understand what it is and how much it is that this [first] commandment requires. It requires that man's whole heart and all his confidence be given to God alone and no one else.... The true worship and service of God, the kind that pleases Him and which He also commands on pain of everlasting wrath...takes place when your heart directs all its trust and confidence only toward God and does not let itself be torn away from Him; it consists in risking everything on earth for Him and abandoning it all for His sake. You can easily judge how, in contrast to this, the world practices nothing but false worship and idolatry.... Everyone has set up for himself some particular god to which he looks for benefits, help, and comfort.... For idolatry does not consist simply in setting up an image and worshiping it; it takes place primarily in the heart, which looks elsewhere than to the one God, seeks help and comfort in created things.... Besides this there is also that false worship, that height of idolatry, which...involves...those who seek comfort and salvation in their own works and presume to capture heaven by putting God under the pressure of an obligation..., they wish to earn everything themselves or merit it by works.... What is this but

turning God into an idol, into a plaster image, while the worshiper actually is setting himself up as his own god. However:...We are to trust in God alone, look to Him, and expect to receive nothing but good things from Him.... Question and explore your own heart thoroughly, and you will find out if it embraces God alone or not. Do you have it in your heart to expect nothing but good things from God, especially when you are in trouble and in need? And does your heart in addition give up and forsake everything that is not God? Then you have the one true God. On the other hand, is your heart attached to and does it rely on something else, from which you hope to receive more good and more help than from God? And when things go wrong, do you, instead of fleeing to Him, flee from Him? Then you have another god, a false god, [an idol]

Martin Luther (1483–1546). A German Protestant pastor and professor of theology, Luther was the son of a mining family, intended to become a lawyer, and at first took monastic orders. On 31 October 1517 Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, sparking the Reformation. His refusal to retract his writings at the demand of Pope Leo X and Emperor Charles V resulted in his excommunication. Luther wrote many works, including his small and large catechisms (from which this quote is taken), and preached hundreds of sermons in churches and universities.

From Luther's Large Catechism, translated by F. Samuel Janzow (St. Louis, MO.: Concordia, 1978), 13–17.

Further Reading

“General Revelation” and “Guilt” in *Concise Theology*, by J. I. Packer.

Prayer

O God, the light of every heart that sees thee, the life of every soul that loves thee, the strength of every mind that seeks thee, grant me ever to continue steadfast in thy holy love. Pour thyself into my heart, and let it overflow, and be so entirely filled with thy pleasures, that there may be no room left for the trifling vanities here below. I am ashamed and tired of living after the way of the world; the very sight and hearing of transitory objects is troublesome: help me, my God, against the insinuations of such, and be thou the joy of my heart: take it all to thyself, and keep thy continual residence there...that I may leave all here below, and serve, and fix, and dwell upon thee alone.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Bishop of Hippo in Roman North Africa, philosopher, and theologian, Augustine is considered a saint and Doctor of the Church by both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion. He wrote an account of his conversion in his *Confessions*, his most known work, but he is also one of the most prolific Latin authors in terms of surviving works with hundreds of separate titles (including apologetic works, texts on Christian doctrine, and commentaries) and more than 350 preserved sermons.

From *Pious Breathings: Being the Meditations of St Augustine, his Treatise of the Love of God, Soliloquies and Manual*, translated by Geo. Stanhope (London: J. Nunn & Co., 1818), 29–31.

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Q18: Will God allow our disobedience and idolatry to go unpunished?

No, every sin is against the sovereignty, holiness, and goodness of God, and against his righteous law, and God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them in his just judgment both in this life, and in the life to come.

Ephesians 5:5–6

For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Commentary

If Jesus Christ did not take care to secure our standing, we should fall to our ruin. Adam fell, and, being our federal head, we fell in him.... "God (says the apostle) included all under sin." What is sin but a breach, that is, a transgression, of the law; "the wages of sin is death;" every transgression of the law incurs damnation.... We must die, we are legally dead.... We have broken God's law, and are liable to eternal condemnation...every one of us without distinction; we are all upon a level.... It is not greatness of station, nor external differences, that make a difference in the internal state of the soul.... This is our state towards God, we have lived in trespasses and sins, [and] are legally dead now.... But, besides this legal death, there is a spiritual death, and the consequence of that is eternal death; if I die in that state, I must die for ever; that is, I must be a creature living eternally banished from God.... It is impossible to know, or to value, that life that Jesus Christ came into the world to impart to us, and procure for us without considering the nature of the death he delivers us from.

George Whitefield (1714 –1770). An English Anglican minister, Whitefield crossed the Atlantic 13 times and for 34 years preached throughout England and America (as part of what is known as the Great Awakening). Whitefield's voice could be heard over vast distances and was reported at one point to be heard by over thirty thousand people in the open air. Whitefield preached more than 18,000 sermons in his lifetime, fewer than 90 have survived in any form.

From "Sermon LXXI: Neglect of Christ, The Killing Sin" in *Sermons on Important Subjects by the Rev. George Whitfield* (London: Fisher, Son & Jackson, 1832), 741–743.

Further Reading

“Mortality” and “Judgement Seat” in *Concise Theology*, by J. I. Packer.

Prayer

Did the Son of God become incarnate, and expire on a cross, merely to lay the foundation of a new religious denomination in the world, and to become the subject of occasional conversation? Or was it that he might be the hope of the guilty, and the Saviour of sinners—the object of their confidence, of their love, and of their unreserved obedience?... If Christ be not yours; if your hearts be not devoted to him; and if you die in that condition, you had better never have been born. May the Lord save you from the wrath to come, and prepare you for the heavenly state! Amen.

Abraham Booth (1734–1806). An English Baptist minister, Booth served as pastor of Prescot Street Church in Whitechapel, London for 35 years as well as founding what is now Regents Park College for ministerial training in Oxford. He is most known for his work *The Reign of Grace*.

From “An Address at the Interment of Mr. Joseph Swain” in *Works of Abraham Booth: Late Pastor of the Baptist Church*, Volume 3 (London: Button, 1813), 289–290.

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