

Excursus: Idolatry and Thankfulness

Psalm 50 is notable in that it presents thankfulness as God's answer to idolatry (ref. again vv. 14, 23). And this perspective isn't unique to this psalm; indeed it is the consistent biblical witness. Whether explicitly or indirectly, the Scriptures hold out thankfulness (gratitude) as antithetical to idolatry, as also the antidote for it. Of course, this thankfulness must be understood biblically, for gratitude as humans naturally understand and express it is actually a manifestation of idolatry.

1. And so the place to begin is with a scriptural understanding of thankfulness. In the Hebrew scriptures, there is no distinct word or word group for the concept of thankfulness/thanksgiving. Rather, thankfulness is a connotation of the Hebrew word for *confession*, where confession refers to one's open agreement with truth as God makes it known, whether that truth pertains to God Himself, His words, or His works. Thus the Hebrew concept of confession parallels the New Testament concept, for the Greek noun rendered *confession* literally translates as *speaking the same*.

The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament provides this commentary on the Hebrew word used to express thankfulness:

"The best rendering of the term is confession... this verb was predominantly employed to express one's public proclamation or declaration of God's attributes and his works. This concept is at the heart of the meaning of praise. Praise is a confession or declaration of who God is and what he does. This term is most often translated "to thank" in English versions, but such is not really a proper rendering... the O.T. does not have our independent concept of thanks. The expression of thanks to God is included in praise; it is a way of praising."

This commentary notes that this same Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament to convey the idea of *praise*, underscoring that thanksgiving, praise and confession are inseparable and mutually interpreting concepts in the Hebrew scriptures. Put most simply, confession is agreement with God and His manifest truth, and this agreement necessarily expresses itself in praise and thankfulness/thanksgiving. *To agree with God is to know Him and His works as they truly are, and this knowledge cannot help but provoke praise and gratitude.*

This is why the scriptures insist that thankfulness is an essential aspect of worship, so that there is no authentic worship where thankfulness and thanksgiving are absent. In the case of the nation of Israel, their worship was centered in a prescribed system of sacrifices and offerings, and this is why the Hebrew scriptures speak of *sacrifices* of thanksgiving and praise as fundamental to the true worship that Yahweh seeks and that honors Him (cf. Leviticus 7:11-14, 19:23-24, 2 Chronicles 30:22, 31:2; Psalm 26:6-7, 27:6, 54:6, 107:21-22, 116:17; Jonah 2:8-9; also Hebrews 13:15). It wasn't that the physical sacrifices and offerings were irrelevant – indeed, Yahweh prescribed them. But they were made authentic and honoring when they proceeded out of hearts filled with praise and gratitude; hearts that acknowledged and celebrated the unilateral relationship between covenant Father and sons.

2. Grasping the antithetical and antidotal relationship between idolatry and thankfulness depends on a scriptural understanding of thankfulness, but also a scriptural understanding of idolatry. In the modern world, idolatry is often caricatured as a primitive religious practice in which people worship imagined spiritual entities and powers, whether those images are given physical form or only exist as concepts. Thus people commonly associate idolatry with unenlightened, pre-scientific human cultures. And because it is a religious phenomenon, idolatry doesn't exist among secular people. How can a person who doesn't believe in any sort of deity or divine power be an idolater? One cannot worship that which he doesn't acknowledge as even existing.

But a biblical understanding of idolatry shows that it is a *universally* human phenomenon, regardless of historical setting, culture, religion, education, etc. Not only are all human beings idolaters, they are *inherently* and *consummately* so; in the words of John Calvin, the human mind is a perpetual idol factory. From the Bible's perspective, idolatry transcends the ritual worship of imagined gods; it speaks to the essential condition of human existence and the fact that each human being is effectively his own god.

- a. The fall left the human creature alienated from the God whose image he bears, and imprisoned within a broken self that has died to the truth of itself. Human beings are thus left with the catastrophic circumstance of having to perceive and process all things – including themselves and their existence – through a distorted mind. As sentient beings, people live in their own minds, but their minds are alienated from God, and so alienated from the truth of themselves. Having lost the true God, man has no choice but to be his own god: to think and judge and act out from himself as his ultimate reference point.
- b. In the end, then, there are only two “gods”: the true God in whose image and likeness humans were created, and the human person himself. All other “gods” are simply constructs of a person's effective self-deification and self-worship. This is true of material and immaterial idols, including demonic ones. People embrace and worship spiritual powers because they believe those powers will serve their own perceived self-interest.

Idolatry is thus the very marrow of human existence under the fall. All people are idolaters because all people are radically self-centered; every person perceives and executes life through the lens of himself. The “gods” a person fashions emerge from his own mind and serve his perceived interests, *and this same dynamic applies to people's interaction with the true God*. They perceive God through their own mind and its notions, and thus embrace and worship an imagined facsimile; their relationship with the true God is just as idolatrous as any relationship they might have with a false deity.

This dynamic highlights the truth that human beings cannot, in themselves, arrive at a true knowledge of God; He must disclose Himself to them. And that is true even of people's knowledge of Jesus, the incarnate God. His fellow Israelites observed Him in person, and yet their knowledge of Him was skewed by their own perspectives and premises. Jesus Himself asserted that no one knows Him except the Father, and those to whom the Father reveals Him (cf. Matthew 11:27; John 6:40-45).

God has fully disclosed and interpreted Himself in the person of His incarnate Son, and the result is that human beings can only truly know Him by knowing Him in the person and messianic work and triumph of Jesus. And the *Spirit* is the key to this knowledge – the Spirit of God who has become the Spirit of Christ. He conveys the knowledge of God through transformation, not information: He causes people to know God by forming and perfecting in them the life and mind of the Messiah who is the fullness of the living God (cf. John 14:8-20, 15:26-16:15; 2 Corinthians 3:16-18; also Romans 8:9-10).

3. These considerations, then, allow us to understand the antithetical and antidotal relationship between thankfulness and idolatry. Idolatry is nothing more than natural human spirituality; it is the way in which humans express their inherent spiritual nature as divine image-bearers in the context of their alienation. Regardless of the object of their devotion and worship, all people in their natural condition are consummate idolaters. It doesn't matter whether they call their god Yahweh, Allah, Nature, or Nothing; in every case they are worshiping self-fabricated, self-serving "gods," and therefore worshiping themselves (cf. Exodus 32:1-4; Isaiah 44:9-20, 46:1-7, 57:1-7; Jeremiah 2:1-28, 3:6-9, 44:15-18; Hosea 2:1-13; Habakkuk 2:18-19; Revelation 17:1-5, 18:1-3).

And because idolatry is the most basic manifestation of estrangement from God, it is also characterized by the absence of thankfulness as the Scripture defines it. For thankfulness is confession of the truth: It is agreement with God in one's perspective, understanding, and valuation, and then the acknowledgment of that agreement in one's attitude, orientation, words and deeds. How, then, can one manifest this sort of thankfulness – this agreement and confession – respecting a God he doesn't truly know? It's not simply that idolaters are unthankful, it's that idolatry absolutely precludes thankfulness because it is antithetical to it.

This shows, then, that thankfulness is the antidote to idolatry in two respects: first, in regard to a person's *essential* relationship with God, and then in his *continuance* and *growth* in that relationship. The first has to do with coming to know God in truth; the second has to do with growing in that knowledge. In terms of coming to know God through faith in Christ, thankfulness isn't the cause or means of that knowledge, but it is the first and most fundamental manifestation of it. The Spirit is the effective agent in bringing a person to the knowledge of God, and He does this by imparting God's own life to that person through union with the resurrected Messiah (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 2:1-6; Colossians 3:1-4). But the evidence and first fruit of that union is thankfulness – gratitude that confesses this God who is now known in a vital spiritual union. This is the primary and most important sense in which Christians are thankful people; thankfulness isn't so much what they *do* as what they *are* as image-children.

So the nurturing of this essential thankfulness is the greatest safeguard against the inroads of idolatry in the lives of God's children. Thankfulness is grounded in genuine knowledge and agreement with the truth, so that the Christian who devotes himself to being grateful (in the biblical sense) is the one who is committed to faithfully fulfilling his sonship – to growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus the Messiah unto the goal of attaining to the measure of the stature of the fullness that belongs to Him.