

IN THEIR HEARTS

Andrew Wilson is Teaching Pastor and Elder of King's Church, in London, England. Seven years ago, he wrote the following:

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to worship idols. It's not that my parents raised me that way, because they didn't; I was brought up in a loving, secure, Christian home. But from childhood until today, my heart has been drawn to idolatry. In fact, if I'm honest, one of the defining features of my identity has been my desire to put something else—popularity, money, influence, sex, success—in place of God. That's just who I am. For many years, I was taught that idolatry was sinful. As a good Christian, I fought the desire to commit idolatry, and repented when I got it wrong. But the desire to worship idols never went away. *I wanted it to, but it didn't.* So it has been such a blessing to discover that worshiping one God, and him alone, isn't for everyone. There are thousands of Christians out there who have found faithful, loving ways of expressing worship both to God and to idols, without compromising either their faith or their view of Scripture. In recent years, I've finally summoned the courage to admit I am one of them. Andrew Wilson, "The Case for Idolatry: Why Christians Can Worship Idols," The Gospel Coalition, May 9, 2017)

Wilson continued his essay by arguing that one can be a good Christian, and worship other gods. Some readers did not understand that Wilson was satirizing Christians who say that homosexuality is not sinful. For Wilson's satire to be effective, the reader must think absurd the idea that a man can be both an idolator and a faithful Christian. The fact is that Christians do understand quite well that it is absurd. Christians, God's New Covenant people, worship and serve the one true God, and Him only. This is a great improvement over God's Old Covenant people who worshiped God and idols. Moreover, in the days of the divided monarchy of Israel and Judah, God's Old Covenant people were, perhaps, five percent of the world population, but God's New Covenant people account for about one-third of the people of the world. The New Covenant far surpasses in greatness the Old Covenant.

After God delivered Israel from their bondage in Egypt, He brought them to Mount Sinai where He made a covenant with them. He said to them:

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. (Exodus 19:4–6)

God delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt so that He might fulfill His promise to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and so that the Israelites might freely worship Him. At Mount Sinai, He made a covenant with the Israelites in which, if they would obey His law, then He would be their God, and they would be His people. They would in this way be unique among all the nations of the earth. The people agreed to God's terms, and answered, "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do." (Exodus 19:8) So, God gave the people His moral law, the Ten Commandments. Moses then slaughtered some animals, and with their blood sealed the covenant, and this meant that, if any man violated the terms of the covenant, then that man deserved to die. After this, Moses went up the mountain to receive further instruction from God, and, when he did not soon return, they commanded Aaron, "Up, make us gods, which shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us

up out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him,” and Aaron did as they commanded. (Exodus 32:1) Within forty days of making a covenant with God, the same God who delivered the Israelites from bondage and mightily defeated the gods of Egypt, the Israelites betrayed Him and worshiped other gods. God was irate with them because of their betrayal, so He destroyed them. (Exodus 32:33-35) Israel had promised to keep God’s law, but, within forty days of making their promise, they broke it.

Any given sin is an offense to God such that the one who commits it deserves to die. The Israelites were, like all people, sinful, and although they agreed to keep God’s law, they were powerless to do so. This meant that every Israelite deserved to die. Yet, God revealed to Moses that He is not only severe, but also merciful. (Exodus 34:6, 7) So, He, in the Book of Leviticus, gave His people a system of animal sacrifices to atone for their sins. He commanded His people to kill certain kinds of animals, and He would accept these deaths in lieu of their own. The Scriptures say, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” (Leviticus 17:11)

Although God time and again proved faithful to His covenant people, they time and again proved unfaithful to Him. They continually broke His commandments, and so broke covenant with Him. The underlying cause of their moral failures was a failure to love God more than anything. Because they broke the first commandment, they broke all the rest. They loved themselves more than they loved God, and so they served other gods in order to get the things that they desired. When the Israelites were ready to enter into the promised land, Moses reminded the people of their covenant with God, and of their obligation to keep His commandments. He especially warned them against serving other gods, the gods of the heathen nations. (Deuteronomy 4) He spoke to them of the essential matter in their covenant with God: the heart. He said:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. (Deuteronomy 6:4–6)

God is the almighty God, the good God, the faithful God. He is the one true God. It is only right that people love Him with everything they have, and Moses commanded them to do it. Yet, man’s original sin, the heart of man is sinful, and so he does not by nature love God, and, because He does not love God, He does not obey Him.

God made a covenant with Abraham, and He gave Abraham circumcision as a sign of it. Every male in Abraham’s household was to be circumcised, and those who were circumcised were to circumcise the males in their households. Circumcision distinguished a man as one of God’s people, and no man could be counted among the people of God if he did not receive circumcision. (Exodus 12:43–49) Yet, circumcision, although it did identify a man as one of God’s covenant people, it did not, in itself, make a man righteous before God. God counts a man righteous if he believes God, and, believing God, obeys Him. So, an Israelite ought to have been in His heart what circumcisions signified. When Moses prepared the Israelites to enter into the promised land, he said to them:

And now, Israel, what doth the LORD thy God require of thee, but to fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good? Behold, the heaven and the heaven of heavens is the LORD'S thy God, the earth also, with all that therein is. Only the LORD had a delight in thy fathers to love them, and

he chose their seed after them, even you above all people, as it is this day. Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked. (Deuteronomy 10:12–16)

Moses told the people that God required them to fear God, and live as God commanded them; to love God, and to serve Him with all their entire being. He told them not to be stiff-necked, refusing to bow to God, but humble, submitting to God. He told them to be in their hearts what circumcision signified: God's holy people. Israel would not heed Moses, however. They would not humbly submit, but rather rebel. They could not change their own hearts. Jeremiah the prophet said, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil." (Jeremiah 13:23) A man cannot change his heart any more than he can change his skin, or than an animal can change its fur. Yet, God is gracious and He graciously promised to help them. He said, "And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live." (Deuteronomy 30:6) God would do what the people could not do. He would change their hearts.

Israel's rebellion continued in the promised land. It continued in the era of the judges, and it continued in the era of the kings. God sent prophets to call the people to repentance, but the people did not listen. So, God caused the Assyrian army to conquer the northern kingdom of Israel, and carry the people away into exile. Afterward, He sent more prophets to the southern kingdom of Judah. Jeremiah rebuked the people for their idolatry. He said:

Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good. Forasmuch as there is none like unto thee, O LORD; thou art great, and thy name is great in might. Who would not fear thee, O King of nations? for to thee doth it appertain: forasmuch as among all the wise men of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, there is none like unto thee. But they are altogether brutish and foolish: the stock is a doctrine of vanities. (Jeremiah 10:2–8)

God compared Himself, the living and true God, with lifeless and false gods, and He said that those who worship other gods are stupid and foolish. The prophet warned Judah that God would send the army of Babylonia to conquer them, and carry them away in Babylon. (Jeremiah 27) Yet God, ever merciful, would restore them. Jeremiah prophesied:

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31–34)

God said that the day would come when He would make with His people a new covenant. It would be superior to the Old Covenant, and would supersede it. The Old Covenant was good in its own way. It told God's people what He required of them if they would be right with Him. It told the laws God would have them keep, and it told them how they could be forgiven if they failed. Yet, it could not empower them to keep the laws, or offer real atonement for when they failed. The problem lay not with the Old Covenant, and not with God's law which is good. The problem lay with the heart of the people. Yet, the people were powerless to change their hearts. They knew what God required, but they could not meet His requirements. So that they would not perish from the earth, God would do for them what they could not do for themselves. He would by His great power change the hearts of sinful men so that they would love Him and obey Him. God would put it in their hearts to keep His law. They would keep His covenant, and He would be their God, and they would be His people. Moreover, this would be the case, not of one nation only, but of all nations. Every nation would worship and serve the one true God, and Him only would they serve. God would accomplish this by His Only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Saint John records the follow event in the life of Jesus, after He made His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem:

And there were certain Greeks among them that came up to worship at the feast: The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus. Philip cometh and telleth Andrew: and again Andrew and Philip tell Jesus. And Jesus answered them, saying, The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honour. (John 12:20–26)

Some Greeks came to the temple to worship at the Feast of Passover, and they came to Philip, the disciple of Jesus, and they told him that they would like to meet Jesus. So, Philip told Andrew, and together they told Jesus. Then Jesus said that the time had come for Him to receive great honor. There is a principle in God's creation that death leads to new life. So, spring follows autumn and winter, and a seed, if it dies, becomes a new plant that bears fruit. So, a man, if he will give up his life to God, then God will raise him to eternal life. If any man will serve Christ, then Christ will humbly serve Christ, then God will honor that man with eternal life.

Then Jesus said, "Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify thy name." (John 12:27, 28) The Son of God willing came into the world to save it by becoming sin for sinful men, by becoming a curse for cursed men. (2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13) He was greatly troubled by what He had to do; yet, He would not ask His Father in heaven to spare Him from it because it was the very thing He and His Father agreed that He should do. So, determined to proceed, He asked His Father to glorify Himself by glorifying His Son.

John records what happened next:

Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again. The people therefore, that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered: others said, An angel spake to him. (John 12:28–30)

Jesus asked His Father to glorify His name, and His Father answered that He had already glorified it in the life of Christ, and would glorify it again in the death of Christ. Some heard the sound of thunder; others the voice of an angel.

Then Jesus said:

This voice came not because of me, but for your sakes. Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. (John 12:30–32)

Jesus told them that God had spoken, not for the benefit of Himself, the Son, but for the benefit of the people, as testimony that Jesus is, in fact, the Son of God. Jesus said that the time had come for the world to be judged. He did not mean that He had come to condemn the world; He told Nicodemus that He did not come into the world to condemn it, but to save it. (John 3:17) Jesus rather meant that the time had come for the present state of the world to be overthrown; the time had come for the Devil, who ruled the kingdoms of men, to be condemned and deposed. The Devil ruled over mankind, but Jesus would, by His death, put an end to the Devil's rule, and redeem mankind. Jesus would be crucified by the rulers of the world, but His death and resurrection would mean new life for the world, not for the Jewish nation only, but for every nation of the world.

Saint Paul wrote to the Hebrews concerning Christ, "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him." (Hebrews 5:8, 9) As Jesus is the Son of God, so He and His Father have one and the same nature. It was, therefore, not possible for Jesus to sin; yet, His obedience was not automatic. He was in every way tempted, and He had to choose to obey, and He never failed to do so. (Hebrews 4:15) Under the Old Covenant, God's people could not learn obedience, and they continually rebelled against God, even worshiping and serving other gods. In the New Covenant, instituted by the death of Christ, God puts His law into the hearts of His people so that they not only desire to obey Him, but do obey Him. Of course, in this life their obedience is not automatic, and it is not perfect; yet, God's people do worship and serve Him alone. They are far from perfect, but they are far better than they were under the Old Covenant. Moreover, His people is not limited to a single nation, but includes all the nations of the world.

Let us understand that, apart from Christ, men can do no good. Let us believe that Jesus is the Christ who came into the world, not to condemn it, but to save it. Let us with joy and gratitude practice obedience to Christ, the world's one true Lord.

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us; unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus, throughout all ages, world without end.

Amen.