

“Setting Aside Our Idols”
1 Thessalonians 1:9
(Preached at Trinity, April 7, 2019)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. We've been looking at the opening portion of Paul's letter to the Thessalonians where he expresses his great gratitude for the outward evidence of God's grace upon their lives, which was evidence of God's election.
1 Thessalonians 1:3-4 NAU - "constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, ⁴ knowing, brethren beloved by God, *His* choice of you"
2. The Gospel had worked powerfully in their lives and they had received the Word of God with great joy, even in the midst of great affliction. They had followed the example of Paul and were seeking to be conformed to the image of Christ. They were now serving as examples for others to follow. Their lives were an example of integrity and faithfulness. They were an example of how to live joyfully in spite of personal hardship.
1 Thessalonians 1:7 NAU - "so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."
3. It wasn't the testimony of their lives alone that was impacting the world around them. The Thessalonians were also actively proclaiming the Gospel:
"For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you"
4. In **Verse 9** Paul adds another evidence of their conversion. They had abandoned their idols in order to serve the living God.
 - a. There is a universal, absolute truth that runs throughout Scripture:
God cannot be served in the midst of idolatry.
This is the simple and essential truth of the Gospel.
 - b. This may sound strange to our ears. Most see idolatry as a relic of the past when superstitious men would construct objects with their hands and then worship them as their gods. Isaiah spoke of the vanity of such worship.
Isaiah 44:14-17 NAU - "He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. ¹⁵ Then it becomes *something* for a man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire; over *this* half he eats meat as he roasts a roast and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, "Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire." ¹⁷ But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god."

- c. The Philistines invented Dagon, fashioned the image and then looked to it to protect them.
Judges 16:23 KJV - "Then the lords of the Philistines gathered them together for to offer a great sacrifice unto Dagon their god, and to rejoice: for they said, Our god hath delivered Samson our enemy into our hand."
1 Samuel 5:2 KJV - "When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon."
- d. God forbids any making of images for the purpose of worship
Exodus 20:4-6 KJV - "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of *any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth: ⁵ Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God *am* a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth *generation* of them that hate me; ⁶ And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments."
5. People today see themselves as far more sophisticated than that. Who would bow before a man-made image? It seems like the height of foolishness.
6. The truth is, idolatry is as much alive today as it has ever been. We have all been guilty of idolatry. Do you know how to define idolatry?
 John MacArthur describes it well – "Idolatry includes much more than bowing down or burning incense to a physical image. Idolatry is having any false god – any object, idea, philosophy, habit, occupation, sport, or whatever that has one's primary concern and loyalty or that to any degree decreases one's trust in and loyalty to the Lord."¹
7. Anything that captures a higher degree of affection than God is an idol.
 The lost man surrounds his life with endless idols.
 This is particularly vile in the sight of God. God alone must be served and worshipped.
Isaiah 42:8 NAU - "I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images."
Exodus 20:3 – "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."
8. Idolatry is a class of sin specifically stated to be so contrary to Christianity that those who indulge in it shall be excluded from our Lord's kingdom.
Galatians 5:19-21 NAU - "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."
Ephesians 5:5-7 NAU - "For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not be partakers with them;"
Revelation 21:8 NAU - "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part *will be* in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

¹ MacArthur, John, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1984), 232-233.

7. The Christian has been delivered from idolatry.
- a. That's Paul point in **Verse 9**
1 Thessalonians 1:9 NAU - "and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,"
 - b. Paul had to remind the Corinthians of their deliverance
1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NAU - "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God."
8. We have been delivered. In other words, we are no longer under the dominion of this sin. Yet, we are always in danger of this sin. This morning I want us to consider the sin of idolatry. It is far more pervasive than we might be willing to admit.
- I. In what ways are people guilty of idolatry today?
- A. In our greed for material possessions
 1. The Bible calls covetousness or greed idolatry
Colossians 3:5 NAU - "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry."
 2. This is at the heart of our Western culture. Materialism governs our priorities. We are ruled by our possessions.
 3. We must never allow money and possessions to draw our affections
Matthew 6:24 NAU - "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."
 - a. The things on earth must only be seen in a utilitarian sense. In other words, we are to only see them for their usefulness.
 - b. We must learn to be frugal. Frugality means to practice minimalism. It means to use things until they've reached the end of their usefulness. It means to be willing to do with less. It means to pay attention to prices. It means to live beneath your means and save for the future.
 - B. In our lust after pleasure
2 Timothy 3:4 NAU - "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God,"
 1. This flows from our lack of a sense of Divine call upon our lives. It is a failure to keep an eternal perspective. Too many Christians live as if this present life is their reward.
 2. In our generation we have a craving for pleasure and excitement more than at any time in the history of our nation – few cultures in the history of the world can match us. And we will go to any expense
The average cost of a movie ticket is now over \$9.00
Disney World tickets cost almost \$130 per day.
This doesn't mean it is wrong for a Christian to go to the movies or Disney World. It's a matter of priority. It is a matter of guarding against idolatry.

- 3 People today, even those who call themselves Christians, profane the Lord's day so they can satisfy this lust for pleasure – this is great idolatry
- C. By granting affection to our families that belongs to God alone
1. Many will use their family to excuse them from service to Christ. Family worship must not be recast as worshipping family.
 2. Jesus warned of placing family before Him
Luke 14:26 NAU - "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple."
 3. Thomas Watson – “They think of their children and delight more in them than in God. This is to make an idol of a child, and to set it in God's room. Thus God is often provoked to take away our children. If we love the jewel more than him that gave it God will take away the jewel, that our love may return to Him again.”²
- D. By allowing our career to draw our attention from God
1. Work is honoring to God, but if our job keeps us from serving Christ it has become an idol. Many use their jobs to justify their non-involvement in the church.
 2. The man who says he will wait until he retires to serve Christ is a fool
- E. By allowing any pursuit to overshadow the pursuit of God and His holiness
1. The Greeks worshipped knowledge
Acts 17:21 NAU - "(Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.)"
Some have made an idol of their education.
Thomas Watson – “Many a man makes an idol of his wit and parts; he deifies himself, but how often does God take the wise in their own craftiness!”³
 2. Athletes often throw their entire lives into their sport (Olympians become consumed with winning the gold, ball players who play on the Lord's Day)
 3. Artists, chefs, musicians, dancers, poets, authors become engrossed in the labors of their particular craft and forget God
- F. By giving inordinate attention to our appearance
1. We can idolize what we see in the mirror
 2. It is idolatry when adorn ourselves in an effort to receive glory from men
 3. If our motive is to draw attention to ourselves rather than Christ it is idolatry.

² Watson, Thomas, *The Ten Commandments*, (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 58.

³ *Ibid.*, 56.

II. Why is Idolatry Such a High Crime Against God?

- A. Because it moves God to the periphery of our lives and places something else in His place.
1. It is placing the creature or the created on the same plane as the Creator
Romans 1:25 NAU - "For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."
 2. Idolatry robs God of His glory and gives it to someone or something else
- B. Paul is stating the radical change in the Thessalonians
1 Thessalonians 1:9 NAU - "how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,"
1. They had traded their idolatry for service to the one true God.
 3. Serving God is an all or none proposition
 - a. Christianity is not just a religion – it is a complete dying to self
 - b. God demands that we love Him with all of our being – heart, soul, mind
Matthew 22:37-40 NAS - "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ "This is the great and foremost commandment. ³⁹ "The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

III. What Are Some Ways to Avoid This High Crime?

- A. We must be mindful of its deception
1. The sin of idolatry is so deceptive and is disguised in so many ways that we are scarcely aware of its presence even when we are fully in its grip
 2. All of us have been guilty of this crime – ALL OF US
 3. Idolatry has the power to intoxicate and blind us from the fact that there is no profit in it
Isaiah 44:9 NIV – “All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame.”
 4. We must be constantly aware of the ever-present danger of idolatry and flee it on every hand
1 Corinthians 10:13-14 NAU - "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it. ¹⁴ Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry."
1 John 5:21 NAS - "Little children, guard yourselves from idols."
 5. We must have the discernment to recognize the idols of our life

- B. We must be content with God alone
1. Earthly circumstances must not distract us from God. Earthly treasures must not entice us. The Christian must find his total contentment in Christ. **Philippians 4:11-13 NAU** - "Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. ¹² I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. ¹³ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."
 2. Pray that God will protect you from being earthbound. **Colossians 3:2 NAU** - "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth."
 Our contentment is found apart from this world
 Your job may not be perfect, your income may be small, you may not have a large home or new car. Your marriage may be challenging, you may not have many friends, your health may be failing.
 Yet you can be content.
 People have found contentment in prison, in totalitarian dictatorships, in poverty, in disease. Jesus Christ has become all in all.

Conclusion:

1. We need to understand the effect the Gospel has upon the sinner. Paul is describing the nature of repentance. They turned *from* their idols *to* God. The direction of their lives was changed. The Thessalonians were transformed. **1 Thessalonians 1:9 NAU** - "how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,"
2. I have shared the many contemporary idols that can lay hold upon our lives. But we must not dismiss the idolatry that plagued the Thessalonians included the worship of other gods; deities that they trusted and depended upon. What we call mythology was very real to them. These gods were all set aside in service to the living God.
3. The Gospel brings us to cast aside anything that dishonors God
 - a. These early Christians were serious about following God, in spite of hardship or inconvenience or adversity – they had been transformed.
 - b. Nothing was too precious to part with.
 What are you willing to part with for the sake of Christ?
Luke 14:33 KJV – "So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple."
 - c. What treasures do you have that are so precious to you you could not imagine parting with them?