

Idolatry Today

Terry DeLaney

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him...The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever. This is our victory that overcomes the world—our faith. (1 John 2:15-17; 5:4) NIV

It's expected that the unsaved—those who reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior—will worship the world and the flesh. They have placed all of their hope in this life, willing to bet that no God or Judgment is waiting for them beyond death's pale. What is troubling is that many Christians—God's chosen people—are slopping at the same trough. The child of God who worships money, materialism and other devices looks so much like the unsaved person that one sees little difference between the two. How then, can their eternal fate be so different?

Israel of the Old Testament wanted to be “like the other nations.” Scripture testifies, “They mingled with the nations, and learned their practices, served their idols, which became a snare to them.” (Ps 106:36) In other words, God's people became indistinguishable from the heathen nations because they imitated their ways. How do we in the church think we're any different?

At this point, some of you will balk, saying, “There's nothing wrong with having nice things!” I agree. My home is full of lovely furniture. I have a new car. My bank account is alright. But I yearn to leave it all behind and go to be with Christ. The things in my life are meaningless. Paul echoes my sentiment: “I count all things as garbage for the sake of gaining Christ.” (Phil 3:8)

If Christians sought Christ with the same enthusiasm they chased after worldly goods, the church would be in good shape. Sadly, they are not “rich towards God” (Luke 12:21) but well trained in the ways of the world.

To the average person, idolatry was something our ignorant and superstitious ancestors did. Yet the practice is alive and well today. Idols were once hand-tooled from various materials offered up by the earth. Today, technological advances have significantly sped up the manufacturing process. We may not bow down to these modern gods, but we certainly serve them. They are all around us.

Religion used to be tightly woven into the sociopolitical, educational, and business fabric. People openly practiced prayer and worship without shame. In stark comparison, “religion” today is isolated from nearly all aspects of life, and public proclamation has been reserved for preachers and fanatics. We don't talk about nor pray to God except in church, the hospital, and at funerals. Even in these circumstances, He only may be given a nod. The things we love to devote our time, conversation and energy to is ourselves—what we've bought, what we're going to buy, and how happy we will be when we finally get it. In those things, we seek reward and happiness. But they are a hollow promise that can never replace the things God has already provided. As Adam and Eve thought they could find “more” in the Forbidden Fruit, so we too believe that we can find happiness apart from our Creator.

In our enlightened age, science has “proven” spiritual ideas to be myth and superstition. While our ancestors ignorantly and openly bowed before wood, stone, and metal, modern man has internalized the concept of God. We have become, as the scripture says, gods ourselves. (Psa 82:6; cf John 10:34-36) Above and beyond anything else, we are worshipers of self. Although our idols don’t appear “religious,” we serve them just as our forefathers did. We are more sophisticated than they, but we serve our gods with gusto and wholehearted dedication.

To facilitate our ambitions of comfort and pleasure, no measure is overlooked, even if it involves murder. Prayers to gods such as Molech were uttered to secure an abundant harvest, and infant sacrifice was considered the preferred method.¹ In much the same way, abortion is employed. By preventing birth, we can maintain our prosperity and status and not be burdened with another mouth to feed. There is one difference, however, between our forebears and us: They sacrificed their children for the sake of ensuring more food was put on the table; we kill ours to avoid getting stretch marks. We kill babies to avoid losing a “soul-mate.” We flush them down the toilet to keep that promotion edge at work. In this, we are more despicable than our predecessors.

The God of Money

The first commandment (Matt 22:36-38) reminds us to exalt God above all else. As the Eternal One and Creator, He deserves pre-eminence. In stark contrast, scripture says, “the love of money is the root of all sorts of evil.” (1 Tim 6:10) Our founding fathers decided to put “In God We Trust” on currency to serve as a reminder of where we’re to put our hope.

Money is not intrinsically evil, no more than a loaded gun is evil. A man may own 100 guns in a collection. Another man has only one gun, where he uses it to commit a crime. A person may have 10 million dollars and exercise Christian stewardship over it. Another may have 10 dollars and use it to buy whiskey. Thus, it is not the amount or the possession of a thing, but its use.

God made Solomon wealthy. (1 Kgs 3:13) He told David that he could have had more if he had wanted it. (2 Sam 12:7, 8) There were those in the early church who had the financial means to help others. (Rom 12:8)

It is the *love* of money that is condemned. God cares not how *much* a person has, but their attitude in putting it to use. In Jesus’ eyes, the poor widow had more wealth than the religious leaders because she gave her all. (Mark 12:42-44) He taught how a particular landowner’s priorities were merely self-serving. (Luke 12:16-20) The Rich Man lived in luxury while Lazarus struggled mightily in plain sight. (Luke 16:19ff) In all cases, the *love* of money serves only to indulge the god within us, forsaking others in need and casting out the One True God.

Solomon wrote, “Money is the answer for everything.” (Ecc 10:19) While money can alleviate many troubles in this life, it is like a narcotic. Just enough will kill the pain while taking more will make you high as a kite. The American Dream is to make as much money as possible to achieve as much pleasure as possible. The more you can rake in, the “higher” you will get.

¹ A hollow metal idol was cast with two arms flattened on top that pointed out and up in an L shape. It was filled with hot coals until it glowed red. The infant was then laid on top of the red-hot arms, where it writhed in horrific agony. The screams and sound of sizzling flesh were covered up by drums and chanting until long after he or she had died.

You can be poor and still crave to be rich. Paul said that “by *longing* for money, many have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.” (1 Tim 6:10) This relates to Jesus’ teachings that lustful *desire* is tantamount to committing adultery. (Matt 5:28) Hate in the heart equals the act of murder. (Matt 5:22) Thus, just the *desire* for wealth is enough to drag you to Hell. The Holy Spirit rightly observes, “those who *want* to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction.” (1 Tim 6:9-10)

The God of Materialism

Stemming from the love of money, materialism is a favorite god in our culture. We devote ourselves to homes, cars, boats, big-screen TVs, collections, and so forth. No money? No problem. Anyone on approved credit can indulge in material pleasure. People faithfully attend services at Walmart, Circuit City, and other such sanctuaries. Malls are packed with worshipers seven days a-week eagerly scurrying from shop to shop, giving no thought to the Lord. They attend Sunday morning church services, thinking that God is well pleased. But they’ve not looked at the bible all week. The only prayers offered up were those offered up by habit at the dinner table.

Paul says, “Offer up your bodies as a holy and living sacrifice, acceptable to the Lord.” (Rom 12:1) On the heels of that, he says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” This kind of sacrifice demands more than 2 hours a week. The term ‘sacrifice’ implies death—total devotion to God. This is why Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20) When a man can name off the quarterbacks of every NFL team but not remember the books of the bible, it begs the question on how much devotion he is giving to the Lord.

Jesus said, “You *cannot* serve God and mammon.”² (Matt 6:24) The attitude is seen in the Rich Young Ruler, who was unwilling to part with his possessions to serve God. (Matt 19:22) He was reluctant to offer up that sacrifice, devoting all to God. Jesus said, “A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of what he has.” (Luke 12:15) Referring to Christians, Paul writes, “If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.” (1 Tim 6:8)

This is not to say we should sell our possessions and live on the edge of poverty. However, people are not content with what they have. Scripture says, “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income.” (Ecc 5:10) We earnestly believe that one day we will achieve that happiness. The old hope, “My ship will come in one day,” illustrates that belief. We believe that our eye will be one day sated from all of the things we’ve collected. We fill our homes and yards with possessions and sell them all at a garage sale to buy more. Car lots are filled with nearly-new vehicles traded in by people who had to have something better.

Jesus said that it was easier to squeeze a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. (Matt 19:23) This extreme comparison illustrates the danger of being rich, and is why the disciples asked Jesus, “Who then can be saved?” Can’t they be saved like anyone else? Of course, they can. But rich folks care little for God. The writer of Proverbs sums it up this way:

² Mammon is properly defined as material goods or worldly possessions.

"Give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God." (Prov 30:8-9)

The Job God

Work is the most important thing in many peoples' lives. They find a certain satisfaction in their work, which points to one of God's purposes for us.

In the beginning, God told Adam to "tend the Garden." (Gen 2:15) Our Savior worked as a carpenter before He began His ministry. (Mark 6:3) Paul was a tent maker even while he preached. (Acts 18:3) Christians are told to work with their own hands. (Eph 4:28) Laziness is spoken against in many scriptures. "If a man is lazy, the rafters sag; if his hands are idle, the house leaks." (Eccl 10:18) Paul said, "If any man will not work, neither let him eat." (2 Thess 3:10) Thus, it is God's will that we keep ourselves busy.

Nevertheless, man has taken God's original intention and used it to further more selfish gains. We want a pay raise, a bonus at Christmas, promotion, more benefits, greater prestige, and a fat retirement plan to maintain our present lifestyle. We lay our families on the altar by sending the wife to work. The whole family is chained to a paycheck simply to have more.

The Job God consumes many of us, sacrificing ourselves to a corporation whose sole interest is the Bottom Line. We go to work before the kids are awake and get home after they're asleep. After 30 years, used up and worn out, we're put out to pasture and promptly forgotten. I've seen guys retire, who come into the office to visit after a month or so. After a couple of visits, they become a nuisance; no one wants to hear what they did 20 years ago.

The God of Self

The whole tactic of Satan in the Garden of Eden was to turn man's eye away from God and look solely to ourselves. The Devil told Eve, "You'll be just like God." Apart from scripture, the whole concept of Evolution is that we pulled ourselves up out of the mud and became that glorious creature called 'man.' In our ultimate sin, we refuse to glorify the Creator and worship and serve the creature instead.

Since the advent of television and mass marketing, America has been actively engaged in self-worship. We are a 'me-me-me' society. Pick any product, and you'll find an ad campaign geared toward emphasizing YOU. Even a famous burger chain advertised for years, "Have it YOUR way."

As a society, we honor human tradition, human strength, human knowledge, and human goodness as the epitome of attainment. God's ways are regarded as narrow-minded and out-of-touch. Alternately, many believe that God overlooks what we do wrong, like an old man who indulges his precocious grandchildren. In the end, it is ourselves we worship, not God. The scripture says that one day, "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Christ is Lord." (Phil 2:9-11)

SUMMARY

There is nothing wrong with having money, or having nice things, or keeping physically fit, or getting a nose job, or sailing the Caribbean. There is nothing wrong with any of the stuff discussed in this article. What *is* wrong—what *is* a sin—is to place *any* of it above God. When we cherish and chase after the world with all of our heart, mind, and being, it is a sin. Those things are reserved for God alone, not our selfish desires. For the Christian, he or she needs to make a distinction between the world and God carefully. “Friendship with the world,” says James “is to make yourself God’s enemy.” (James 4:4)

Samuel told Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your hearts, then rid yourselves of the idols...and commit yourselves to the Lord *and serve him only*, and He will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines.” (1 Sam 7:3) We won’t trust God to help us in time of need, and rely so desperately on our own devices.

Many of us in the church wish to serve God *and* maintain our relationship with the world. We want to live the good life now and ease into heaven when we die. I wonder and worry.

Terry DeLaney
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