

A misty forest scene with a path leading to a bright light, surrounded by trees and fallen leaves. The path is covered in red and orange autumn leaves. Several large, dark rocks are scattered along the path. The trees are tall and thin, with some green and some yellowing leaves. The overall atmosphere is serene and spiritual.

What it means to Worship God

Introduction

In 1979, Bob Dylan recorded the song *Gotta Serve Somebody* on his album *Slow Train Coming*. The refrain, repeated 7 times, makes the following observation:

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

Today, in our continuing series on worship, we will demonstrate that Dylan was correct and examine the roots of destructive idolatry and spiritual adultery, and conclude with God's solutions for dealing with the idols we have, perhaps unknowingly, created in our own hearts.

The Commandment

- “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” (Ex. 20:3-6; cf. Dt. 5:7-10).
- “You shall not make for yourself any gods of cast metal” (Ex. 34:17).
- “You shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” (Ex. 34:14).

Prohibition Against Idolatry

- “When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, **you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them**, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall serve the Lord your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you” (Ex. 23:23-25).
- “There shall be no strange god among you; you shall not **bow down** to a foreign god. I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it” (Ps. 81:9-10).

In the Days of Joshua

“Therefore, be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left, that you may not mix with these nations remaining among you or **make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or serve them or bow down to them**, but you shall cling to the Lord your God just as you have done to this day” (Josh. 23:6-8).

The Golden Calf

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go down, for your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them. They have **made for themselves a golden calf and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it** and said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!’ And the Lord said to Moses, ‘I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people. Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them, in order that I may make a great nation of you’” (Ex. 32:7-10).

The Biblical Account



The Adoration of the Golden Calf

Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)

The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, London

- The Israelites said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (Ex. 32:4).
- Aaron built an altar and offered burnt offerings; they worshiped the calf and sacrificed to it.
- The O.T. text says the Israelites corrupted themselves and turned aside from God’s way.
- God called them “a stiff-necked people” (vs. 9).

A Commentary on the Golden Calf in *Psalms*

“They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of god for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wondrous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. Therefore he said he would destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them” (Ps. 106:19-23).

A Commentary on the Golden Calf in *Acts*

“And at that time they made a calf and brought a sacrifice to the idol, and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, ‘It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O House of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship them. I also will remove you beyond Babylon’” (from Stephen’s defense as cited in Acts 7:41-43).

The Israelites Bow Down to Idols

- “And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They **went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them.** And they provoked the Lord to anger” (Judges 2:12).
- “While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel” (Num. 25:1-3).

The Israelites Bow Down to Idols

- “Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made” (Is. 2:8).
- “He (the ironsmith) makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it...He prays to it and says, ‘Deliver me, for you are my god!’” (Is. 44:15,17).
- “And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offering to other gods and worshiped the works of their own hands” (Jer. 1:16).
- “...there were about 25 men with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east, worshiping the sun toward the east” (Ezek. 8:16).

Intergenerational Idolatry

- “So these nations feared the Lord and also served their carved images. Their children did likewise, and their children’s children – as their fathers did, so they do to this day” (II Kgs. 17:41).
- What parents do in moderation, their children do in excess.

What God Says About Idolaters

- They corrupt themselves (Ex. 32:7).
- They have turned aside from the ways God commanded them (Ex. 32:8).
- They are stiff-necked (Ex. 32:9; cf. Jer. 13:10).
- They forgot God (Ps. 106:21).
- They have done evil in the eyes of the Lord and transgressed His covenant (Deut. 17:2).
- They provoked the Lord to anger (Judges 2:12).
- They have abandoned God (I Kgs. 9:9).

The Penalty for Idolatry

“If there is found among you, within any of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, a man or woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, in transgressing his covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have forbidden, and it is told you and you hear of it, you shall inquire diligently, and if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones...So you shall purge the evil from your midst” (Deut. 17:2-7).

The Penalty for Idolatry

- “You shall surely perish” (Deut. 8:19; 11:17; 30:17).
- “The anger of the Lord will be kindled against you” (Deut. 11:17; 29:27; Num. 25:3; Josh. 23:16; Judges 2:14).
- “I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them” (I Kgs. 9:6; II Chron. 7:20; cf. Deut. 29:28; Josh. 23:15).
- “I will cast [you] out of my sight” (II Chron. 7:20).
- “It will be a snare to you” (Ex. 23:33).

When We Turn From God

“Therefore God gave them over to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever” (Rom. 1:24-25).

Idolatry in the New Testament

- “Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (II Cor. 6:16).
- “You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led” (I Cor. 12:2).
- “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (I Thess. 1:9).
- “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (I Jn. 5:21).

Paul in Athens

- “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols” (Acts. 17:16).
- Pausanias (120-180 A.D.) gave a detailed description of Greece, including: “Outside the city (Athens), the Athenians have sanctuaries of the gods, and graves of heroes and of men.”



The Parthenon on the Acropolis

“The whole of the land are alike sacred to Athena” - Pausanias

What Is An Idol?

“It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give.”



Timothy Keller

Founding Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City
Theologian, Author, & Apologist
1950 -



C.S. Lewis: *Mere Christianity*

“Most people, if they had really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us, are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning, can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades away in the reality.”



Insights from Timothy Keller

- “Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols.”
- “In ancient times, the deities were bloodthirsty and hard to appease. They still are.”
- “The human heart is a factory that mass-produces idols.” “These men (elders of Israel) have set up their idols in their *hearts*” (Ezek. 14:3).
- “All idolatry is destructive.”
- “You don’t realize Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have.”
- “The Lord cannot be added to a life as one more hedge against failure.”

The Scope of Idolatry



Timothy Keller

“Most people know you can make a god out of money. Most know you can make a god out of sex. However, *anything* in life can serve as an idol, a God-alternative, a counterfeit god.”

Getting at the Heart of Idolatry

“An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’ There are many ways to describe that kind of relationship to something, but perhaps the best one is *worship*.”

- Timothy Keller



A Partial List of Deities

- Beauty/Appearance
- Money/Economic Prosperity
- Power (Military/Political/Work)
- Social Standing/Memberships
- Romantic love/Relationships
- Family
- Health/Fitness
- Technology
- Hard Work
- Self-Discovery
- Personal Fulfillment
- Peace
- Happiness
- Intelligence/Knowledge
- Accomplishments
- Arts/Self-Expression

When Idols Are Threatened or Removed

- Bitterness
- Despair
- Disenchantment
- Anxiety
- Pride
- Anger
- Drivenness
- Control
- Hopelessness



Timothy Keller: “Is There Hope?”

- “Idols cannot simply be removed. They must be replaced.”
- “Look for your idols at the bottom of your most painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong.”
- Knowing that God loves you and blesses you will make idols unnecessary.
- “The secret to change is to identify and dismantle the counterfeit gods of your heart.”
- “Our patterns of living reveal our idols.”
- **“Worship is the final way to replace the idols of your heart.”**



Blaise Pascal



“There is no surer sign of
extreme weakness of mind
than the failure to
recognize the unhappy
state of man without God.”