

Confronting Cultural Idols Pt. 2

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Date: 18 October 2020

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[0 : 00] 1 John is possibly the last or close to the last book of the Bible written. It was probably written somewhere between 90 and 95 AD.

And this very well may have been John's final piece of writing to his church before he passed away. And what we're going to do is look at the final verses of this book.

And what we see is pretty interesting. John leaves us, he leaves his church with this one simple command. Little ones, keep yourselves from idols.

Now an idol is a false god. It's anything in our lives that takes the place of God. And last week we spent our entire time talking about all of the ways that idols play a role in who we are and how we live.

We talked about the way that idols shape the culture around us. And we said that all human beings, even non-religious people, have something at the center of their lives that they cannot live without.

[1 : 08] Some ultimate thing. And that's essentially what an idol is. And the same is true of cultures. All cultures have idols at their center. But this passage is different.

Because in this passage, John is speaking to Christians. He's talking to his people. And he is warning Christians about the danger of idols.

And that's interesting because these are people who, by definition, we would expect should have rejected the worship of idols and who, by definition, were worshipers of God in Jesus Christ.

But the truth is, the biggest threat to the spiritual vitality of the church, the biggest deterrent to non-Christians coming into the church who may be open to the truth of the gospel, And the biggest reason why your faith may feel dead or inert or empty, the biggest reason for all of these things is that idols in the surrounding culture are always seeping into the church like water seeps into a basement.

And when that happens, they begin to cause all kinds of rot and mold and spiritual decay. Idols are always seeping into the church.

[2 : 29] And so as a part of our series on gospel and cultural renewal, we're going to spend our time this week focusing on idolatry in the church. Because before Christians have any hope of confronting idols in the culture, we first have to confront the idols in our own house, in the church.

And so that's why we're looking at 1 John 5, verses 19 through 21. This passage shows us two things. It shows us why idols are dangerous, and it shows us how to guard against them, which is John's command.

So let's pray, and then we'll open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your ability to minister to us through your word. And we pray that you would do that in the power of your Holy Spirit for the glory and the sake of Jesus Christ.

Amen. So why are idols so dangerous? You know, growing up, my family watched a lot of scary movies. And in a typical scary movie, even if it's not clear at the beginning of the movie, by the end of the film, evil has been clearly identified.

Evil is always some other thing. It's a monster, or it's an alien, or it's a maniacal killer trying to kill the protagonist. And the protagonist in some movies is able to overcome that evil, or at least to escape that evil.

[3 : 56] And so I think that most people prefer to think of evil this way. Evil is something other. It's something different. And so when it comes to the greatest acts of evil ever committed in real life, such as the Holocaust, I think most people assume that the people behind an evil such as the Holocaust must be monsters.

They must be other. They must be maniacal killers. And that's precisely what Hannah Arendt thought. She's the great political philosopher who went to report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann,

who's the, or many people referred to him as the architect of the Holocaust.

And if you think about somebody like that, the architect of the Holocaust, you would expect, and this is what she expected, she expected to see a monster. She expected to meet a creature of pure evil. And yet Eichmann completely defied her expectations. Eichmann, it turns out, was no monster. He was no maniacal killer.

Eichmann was, in fact, a boring bureaucrat. She was shocked to realize that he was not motivated by some deep-seated extreme anti-Semitism or malevolence.

[5 : 14] He was motivated by the same things that tend to motivate most of us. He was motivated by careerism. He was motivated by conformity.

He was motivated by obedience to his superiors. He was motivated by the desire to be thought well of and respected by people whom he respected.

And what we see in Eichmann and what Hannah Arendt learned through this encounter is something incredibly important. And that is that most of the time, evil doesn't look like a monster. Evil can simply be a person living an unexamined life, going about their daily tasks, never really pausing to consider the meaning or the consequences of their actions.

As Hannah Arendt said in her last book before she passed away, the sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be good or evil.

[6 : 23] Now, this is not to say that there is no such thing as spiritual evil. John, in verse 19, says the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. But here's the thing that I want you to notice about this.

According to John, there's no struggle. There's no epic battle between good versus evil, which is what so many movies depict and what so many human beings assume is true of the world.

There is no epic battle between good and evil. He says the world lies in the power of the evil one. The world is sedate. The world is spiritually asleep.

The world is inert. The world is slumbering peacefully in the arms of the evil one. And you ask, well, how could this be true?

And the answer is idols. The anesthetizing power of idols. When we allow something in our lives other than God to become ultimate, whether it's wealth or career or power or something else, we may not know it.

[7 : 33] But we are actually giving our allegiance to the evil one. This is why in other places in Paul's writing, when he writes about idols, he says, On one level, they're deaf and dumb and mute.

They're nothing. But on another level, they have a spiritual evil behind them. When we give our allegiance to idols, we are in league with demons. And so there is a true spiritual evil.

This is what John refers to as the evil one. But what we need to understand is it operates behind the scenes. It's not like horror movies. It operates through idols.

And so you can live your entire life with good intentions. You can try to do right. You can have worthy goals that you're pursuing. And yet at the same time, you can be spiritually asleep in the arms of evil.

And this is the crucial point we need to see. There is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to idols. When it comes to idols, we only have two options.

[8 : 36] Active resistance or passive surrender. If we are not actively resisting, actively fighting against idols, that means that we have already passively surrendered.

In other words, idolatry is our default factory setting. And so what John is saying is that Christians are not immune to this danger. When you give your life to Jesus in faith and when you become a follower of Jesus, it sets you free from sin.

It sets you free from the penalty of sin. It sets you free from death. It restores your relationship with God. But it does not make you immune to the anesthetizing power of idols.

Gerhard Cattel was one of the greatest biblical scholars in his day. He was an expert in Judaism. And any serious theological library you go to, you will find a copy of his theological dictionary of the New Testament.

And yet at the same time, this biblical expert was also an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party.

And at one point, he was finally arrested for war crimes.

[9 : 47] And you ask, well, how could this possibly be? Well, just like Adolf Eichmann, Cattel, along with many other Christians, was seduced. He was anesthetized.

He was sedated by the cultural idols of the day. And Scott McKnight writes, for Christians, the temptation in 1930s Germany was to become a German Christian, a form of Lutheranism that was engulfed by race and nation and blood and land.

And this is the reason that idols are so dangerous, the reason they're so insidious, and in particular, cultural idols. Because we don't even know that they're there.

We don't even know that they're there. They're simply the water that we swim in. In 1930s Germany, the cultural water was saturated with the idols of nationalism and ethnocentrism.

And that idol-saturated water seeped into the church like water into the basement of a house. And so many Christians, people like Cattell, were seduced by them without even knowing it was happening.

[10:58] And so here we have John's final warning in its context to the church. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. In other words, guard vigilantly against idols seeping in to the church.

Now, how do we do this? How do we go about guarding against idols in the church? Well, it takes a couple of things. Number one, in order to guard against idols, we have to be able to identify cultural idols.

And the only way to see idols, which are essentially false gods, for what they are, is by knowing and seeing clearly the true God. And when you know the true God, then you have a basis of comparison, and you're able to see false gods for what they really are.

And so John says in verse 20, we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true. And then a little bit later, he refers to God as the true God.

So Jesus came to give us understanding. Jesus came to free us from idols. Jesus came so that we could know the true God and thereby identify the false gods in the world.

[12:13] And so then the question comes, how do we know Jesus? And this points us back to the opening of 1 John. The first thing John says in his letter is this. He says, starting in verse 3, So here John is talking about the testimony of the apostles.

He's talking about the scriptures. He's talking about that which we have seen and heard we now proclaim. So in other words, the only way to see false gods is to know the true God.

The only way to know the true God is through Jesus Christ. And the only way to know Jesus Christ is through the testimony of the apostles, the scriptures that were written by John and the other apostles about what they had seen and heard firsthand.

So the point is this. In order to guard against idols seeping into our spiritual life, seeping into the church, we have to be able to identify them.

And that means that our relationship with scripture has to be profound. Scripture has to be so deeply in us that it becomes the lens through which we view culture and we view it critically.

[13:38] So scripture becomes the critical lens through which we view the culture around us. It's almost as though when you use scripture this way, if you'll forgive the metaphor, it's almost as though you're putting on a pair of spiritual augmented reality glasses that allow you to see things that you would otherwise not be able to see, but it allows you to see things as they really are.

And this is very important because most of the time Christians are tempted to do the exact opposite of this. Instead of viewing culture through the lens of scripture, we're very tempted to view scripture through the lens of culture.

And so there are always and have always been churches and denominations that make the decision to reinterpret or altogether ignore certain parts of scripture.

And they're tempted to revise their theology to fit better with the most popular social and cultural views of the day. That's always a temptation. But as we said last week, when you do that, you open the floodgates of idolatry.

You open the floodgates and idols pour into the church. And this is why, as we said a couple of weeks ago, the churches and denominations and Christian groups that have revised and diluted their theology are all either dead or dying.

[15:09] And so we have to resist this temptation. Scripture must be the lens through which we view culture, not the other way around. To return to the German illustration for just a moment, unlike Cattell, there were Christians who did resist the Nazis.

There were people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth. And you ask, well, what made the difference? What was the difference between these people? All of these men studied scripture and

had a deep theological understanding of scripture.

But for Cattell, his study remained largely academic. It never penetrated his heart. The culture essentially shaped his approach and interpretation of scripture rather than the scripture shaping his approach to culture.

And so he remained more or less blind to the way that idols had seeped into his spiritual life.

Contrast that with Bonhoeffer and Barth, who were clearly shaped by scripture.

They led in the drafting of the Barman Declaration, which used scripture to justify opposition to Nazism. It provided the doctrinal foundation for Christians to oppose the Nazis.

[16 : 26] And here's what it says in that declaration. Jesus Christ, as he has attested for us in holy scripture, is the one word of God which we have to hear and which we have to obey in life and in death.

So they're clearly looking at their culture through the lens of scripture. Their sense of allegiance is crystal clear. Our allegiance is to Jesus in the scriptures, not to the culture around us.

And that's what made it possible for them to identify the way these idols of nationalism and ethnocentrism were creeping into the church and to take a stand against it. Right, so the first thing in order to guard against idols is we need a way to see idols.

And that means scripture has to become the lens through which we view the culture around us. The second thing we need is a lifestyle of ongoing repentance. It's not enough to see the idols in our midst if we're not willing to repent, if we're not willing to leave those idols and go back to our first love, Jesus Christ.

So even as Christians work to bring renewal, we're also always seeking to be renewed ourselves again and again and again. The church is always needing to repent, always needing to come back to Christ again and again and again in every age.

[17 : 48] And this means our posture toward culture is not one of finger-wagging where we're sanctimoniously speaking down to the secular world. Rather, we are like fellow inmates who have just had the fortune of being set free from our idols for this moment.

And we are desperately trying to set as many other people free as we possibly can in the time that we have. So our posture toward culture is very much one of humility.

It's very much one of a shared struggle against the true common enemy, which is the evil one and the idolatry through which he works.

And it can be very hard to admit when we look at the past that Christians have been complicit in something like Nazi Germany or with slavery or Jim Crow or any of the other myriad historical examples that we could name.

But one of our greatest strengths as the church lies in our capacity for self-correction. That is one of our greatest strengths throughout history is our capacity for self-correction.

[18 : 59] And the more often we repent of idols in the church, the more we grow in our faith, the more effective we become in the ministry that Jesus calls to.

As one of my friends who's a pastor likes to say, Christians should be trigger happy when it comes to repentance. We should be eager to repent as often as we can. And so as we look at the church today in our society, as we look at ourselves, the question arises, what do we need to repent of?

What are some of the idols that we see creeping into the basement of the church? And, you know, on a national level, as we look at the church in the U.S.

across the last half a century, I think for many, there's a need to repent of the idols of nationalism and power. Now, you know, I want to make it clear that nationalism is not the same thing as patriotism.

And I actually think that patriotism is a very good thing. And I think that we, it's right to be patriotic and to love our country and to be for our country. But when Christians begin to merge their Christian identity with their American identity, when we begin to forget that our primary citizenship is in the kingdom of God and not in the United States of America, when we begin to forget that we are sojourners and exiles and that this world is not ultimately our home until Jesus Christ renews it, that's when it starts to become idolatry.

[20 : 29] Likewise, when we think about power, I think that it's clear that evangelicals in particular have sacrificed a lot of integrity in the quest for political and cultural power.

And what you see are many Christians who are seeking power so that they can exert greater and greater control over the culture. Instead of using the power and the privilege that we have to build a

more just society for everyone, especially the people with whom we may disagree. So these are issues in the church at large for sure. But I also want to say this. I don't actually think that those are the biggest challenges in our church. I think our church is maybe a little different. Most of the people in our community would probably not refer to themselves as evangelical. I know for a fact from talking to people that some people come to our church because they're trying to figure out how to be a Christian without having that demographic label of evangelical on them. Now, regardless of what you think about that or how you feel about it, it's simply something that is true of our community. But what we need to realize is that with that separation, there can often be a sense of smugness, a smug feeling of superiority over those other Christians.

[21 : 58] And I think that our idols probably more fall into the categories of respectability and security. We like to think of ourselves as the educated Christians, the urban Christians, the culturally savvy and sophisticated Christians, the kind of Christians who might go to a racial justice rally but wouldn't be caught dead at a pro-life rally.

And what's interesting about this is that theologically both issues matter a great deal and Christians should care about both issues for the same reason because of our theology of personhood. But the truth is that one cause is far more socially acceptable in a place like Washington, D.C. than the other cause is. So for many in our community our worst fear is being accused of being hateful or intolerant or being called a bigot.

And so I think that for many in our community the biggest temptation is to simply fly under the radar. It's to blend in as much as possible. It's to be theological conservatives in liberal clothing. To remain perpetually uncertain about any doctrine that might be found offensive by others. And essentially to minimize the chances that we might lose people's respect because of our faith.

[23 : 24] You know, these are certainly some of my biggest temptations if I'm totally honest about my heart. And so what we really need to see and I think that what John's warning says to us is that when we do this that we're actually no different than someone like Gerhard Cattel.

Right? We're allowing the culture to dictate our faith. We're allowing the culture to shape our relationship with Jesus and the scriptures rather than the other way around.

And so to the extent to which we are doing these things we need to repent. We need to return to our first love. We need to let go of our idols whether they be nationalism or power or respectability or security or any of the other things that they might be.

And the good news is we can repent as often as it takes because our identity in Christ is secure. Jesus is not waiting for us to get it right before he embraces us.

He has embraced us and it is in his arms that we learn how to live set free from the arms of the evil one. He has awakened us spiritually and the call now is to stay awake to stay vigilant to stay watchful until Jesus comes again.

[24 : 49] As John says in verse 19 we know that we're from God. We know that. That is the one thing that is true and unshakably true.

Right? So even when we try to let go of God and even when we're tempted to run and to take hold of idols the good news of the gospel is this is that God is the kind of God who will never let us go. Let's pray. Lord we thank you and we know that the core of this the core message is that we have no hope apart from you. And not only do we need you to set us free from idols and to restore us to relationship with you in Jesus Christ.

But we need the spiritual power of the Holy Spirit to keep us free from idols to help us be vigilant in our struggle against the evil one and the anesthetizing power of the idols that surround us in our culture.

That we might be salt and light in the ways that you have called us to be Lord and ultimately that we might speak and live in ways that point not to ourselves but to your glory Lord.

[26 : 01] And it's in the name of that glory and of your son Jesus Christ that we pray. Amen.