

Confronting Cultural Idols

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[0 : 00] The late Senator Ted Kennedy once said that the ballot box is the place where change begins in America. And I think there are many people in our society who would fully agree with him, especially when it comes to the November election.

Many people feel like it all comes down to the vote in November. And I want to be clear, voting does matter. And as we look to the presidential election this November, there are vast differences between the candidates.

They are different personalities. They represent very different parties. And they have very different policies in some very key issues. And so the election does matter.

And elections like this impact many, many, many lives. But this will not bring the kind of sweeping change that I think many people are hoping for.

And that's because with all due respect to Ted Kennedy, change does not begin in the ballot box. Politics, as it is often said, is downstream from culture.

[1 : 07] And yet even when we look at culture, culture itself is influenced by an even more fundamental force. And that is the influence of idolatry.

So as part of our series on the gospel and culture, we're going to be looking at cultural idolatry this week. The role that idols play in culture, which then in turn shapes everything else, including our politics.

And we're going to be looking at Acts chapter 17 in order to do this. And the main idea is essentially this, that we cannot hope to change culture in any meaningful way unless we are able to confront the idols that sit at the heart of that culture.

Any hope of changing culture begins by confronting the idols at the heart of that culture. And so we're going to look at Paul in Athens that we begin hearing about in Acts chapter 17.

And we're going to try to understand cultural idols and then to identify some of our cultural idols. And then lastly, we're going to talk about what it looks like to confront cultural idols.

[2 : 16] Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. We all need it more than we know. We pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would open your word to us.

And that through it, we would see the living word, Jesus Christ, face to face. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So first of all, understanding cultural idols.

Paul arrives in Athens sometime around A.D. 51. And it says this in verse 16. While Paul was waiting for his friends at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols.

Now, I want to make it clear, this is not just talking about statues of idols that decorated the city. There were many of those, some 30,000 or more. But what these statues represent is what we want to talk about.

Because these statues represented the core ideals and values that were most revered in the Athenian culture. So when the Bible talks about idols, what it's really talking about is the fact that almost anything in creation, and often they are good things, can become ultimate things.

[3 : 34] When we make something into an idol, we take something that is often a good thing, and we elevate it so that it becomes the most important thing, something that we love and revere more than God himself.

So that's what an idol is. And so if you're in Athens, as Paul was, and you see statues of Athena or Aphrodite or Demeter, you're not just seeing statues.

What you're actually seeing is that the Athenian culture is one that worships and reveres things like human reason, or wisdom, or sex, or beauty, or fertility and agriculture.

This is an insight into the Athenian culture. And these are all good things, right? Reason is a good thing. Wisdom is a good thing. Sex is a good thing.

But when they become ultimate things, they become idols. And that's what we see here in the Athenian culture. And this gives us a little bit of insight into how culture works.

[4 : 38] The actual word culture is derived from two root words. First, the Latin cultus, which means to worship or revere. It has religious connotations.

And then there's the French collar, which means to plow or till. It's an agricultural term that essentially means what we make out of the world. So if you put these two things together, you really have an idea of what culture actually is.

You start out with something at the center, something that human beings worship or revere or idealize, a kind of central thing that we love and give our allegiance to.

And then everything that we create reflects that thing at the center. So culture is built up around whatever sits at the center that human beings most worship and revere.

And so you have our values, our beliefs, our behaviors, our customs and mores, our arts, our politics, our entire way of life emerges and reflects that which is at the center.

[5 : 44] So in the words of Henry Van Til, culture is religion externalized. It's religion externalized. So this is a fundamental starting place for how Christians think about culture, both our culture and other cultures as we look around the world.

Scripture says that every single human being, whether they know it or not, is made in the image of God. And so there are ways that we reflect God as our creator. And yet it also says that every single human being has rejected God and has replaced the worship of God with the worship of idols.

That's what Paul says in Romans chapter 1. That's what's wrong with the world. But what we want to focus on is the fact that this is not only true of individuals, it is also true of cultures.

And that makes sense when you recognize that all culture is created by human beings. So every culture has within it things that reflect the goodness and the truth and the beauty of God.

Every culture also has within it things that reflect our idolatry. And this changes from one city to the next, from one culture to the next. But every culture has at the center of it things that have become idols.

[6 : 59] And so the only difference between Athens and our city that we live in right now, our society that we live in and our country, the only difference is that we don't have the statues that identify the idols the way Athens did.

And so we have to ask, how do we identify the idols of our culture? What are the idols in our culture? Well, it's usually easier to spot the idols in other cultures than it is our own, because it's hard to see the water that we're swimming in very clearly.

I read an article a few years ago in the New York Times called The Pretenders, and it talked about a social phenomenon in Japanese culture. In Japan, the shame of getting fired is so extreme.

It's so overwhelming that there are many businessmen, and this mainly applies to men, who even after they lose their job, they will pretend that they're still going to work.

They won't tell their families or their friends. And so they wake up every morning, they get dressed in their suit, they leave as though they're going to work, and then they simply wander around the business district until it's time to come home in the evening.

[8 : 12] And that's because in this culture, honor has become an ultimate thing. Honor for many people has become an idol. It is the ultimate thing. And so shame, by contrast, is the worst thing imaginable.

And so people will do anything to avoid such a thing. And so we see something like this as Americans, and we have a hard time understanding why people might do this, but that's because it's a different culture.

In the same way, when you look at other cultures and you see practices like stoning or like female circumcision, these exist in cultures where things like family or female purity have been elevated to the status of idolatry.

And so, again, as Americans, we look at something like that, and we get outraged and horrified that anybody would do that. But that's because we have different idols. We have different things that we have put at the center of our culture.

And so we need to ask, what are those idols? Well, I just want to give a few examples. If you look at our culture, one of the things that makes the culture in our society unique is that it's rooted in the political philosophy known as liberalism.

[9 : 27] And I want to make it clear that this is liberalism, which isn't the same thing as people who say that they are liberal. Liberalism is something that Democrats and Republicans share.

Even though they differ in their approach and in their strategy and in the means, they are siblings, you might say, in the same philosophical family tree.

And liberalism is defined by core values such as individualism or freedom or a free economy. And so these values, as we look at them, these values are by themselves good things, just like in other cultures, honor is a good thing.

Family is a good thing, right? These core values are good things. The idea that human individuals have inherent rights and that the role of a limited government should be to secure those rights.

Or a relatively free market that allows for innovation and competition, which means you're theoretically able to get better goods and services at lower prices.

[10 : 34] These are good ideas that have done enormous good for our society. But the problem is, some of the biggest problems in our society today come from the fact that these core ideals have become idols.

They have become inflated and twisted and distorted into idols that we worship at the very center of our culture. So just to give a couple of examples of this, our core value of individualism.

On its own, it's a good idea. But we've pushed it way too far in our society. It's become inflated and distorted into this idolatry of the self.

And so in our culture, the absolute sovereignty of the self overrules everything else. And our feelings have become the only source of absolute truth.

When it comes to our beliefs and our morality, we are highly encouraged by our culture to create our own beliefs and morality and that our feelings override every other form of authority.

[11 : 45] And the only thing that matters is whether or not something feels right to me. Anything that impinges on personal freedom, whether it be society or wisdom from previous generations or parents or church or even science, anything that impinges on my personal freedom is something that needs to be challenged and deconstructed.

And this is why we have people on one side redefining their entire identity based on how they feel. And we have people on the other side who are refusing to wear masks during a pandemic because they see it as something that impinges on their personal freedom.

All of this is connected to the idolatry of the self. And it's frankly tearing the social fabric of our society apart. This is the difference between a good thing and an ultimate thing and the harm that it can do.

One more example that I'll give is the example of wealth. Likewise, just as we talked about individualism, a free market is a good idea.

But in our society, it has become hijacked by the idols of wealth and consumerism and materialism. And so even though we have a system that theoretically affirms the equality of all people, it is rife with injustice and is rife with economic inequality.

[13 : 13] The American dream has become a brutal meritocracy where the wealthiest families are getting wealthier while many other people are being left further and further behind.

And especially this is true when you look at the racial wealth gap, which has actually gotten worse since COVID started. You have people who are burying themselves under college student loan debt that they may never come out from under the weight of that debt, but they do it because they're pursuing this Americanized definition of success that includes a college degree.

And through technology, everything is becoming commodified, including human beings. Your personal information is now arguably the most valuable commodity there is.

And so the reason that services like Google or Facebook are free, the reason those things are offered freely to you is because you are not actually the customer.

You're the product. You're the product, or more accurately, your information is the product that is being bought and sold. And so we spend hours of our day posting and tweeting under the illusion that any of that actually matters or makes a difference.

[14 : 40] But what's actually happening is that we are exchanging our personal information, which is now a commodity, for little hits of dopamine, for little hits of social affirmation.

And we're like rats in a lab just clicking away at that button. And all of our information is being bought and sold in the new economy of big data.

Now, this all may sound like a kind of anti-Western, anti-capitalist rant, and I think that there are many people out there who actually do believe that the problem is the system and that what we need to do is to scrap the old system.

It's not working anymore and that we need to replace it with a new and better system. And I think that that is especially true among my own generation and even some of the younger generations than my generation, people who think that it would be so much better if we switch to something like socialism, right?

But this is the whole point I'm trying to make. The issue is not the system itself. The problem is not the system itself. The problem, the core problem, is idolatry.

[15:52] It's idolatry. And history shows us that when idols, such as the idol of wealth or the idol of power, when those sit at the center of a culture, there is no political system that is immune from the corrosive influence of those idols.

They can tear any system down and distort any system to do massive harm to the populace. Al Walters, in his classic *Creation Regained*, says this.

He says, The great danger is to always single out some aspect of God's good creation and identify it, rather than the alien intrusion of sin, as the villain.

Something in the good creation is identified as the source of evil. He says this is where all other worldviews go wrong. So he says, Plato and the Greek philosophers said it was the body and its passions.

That's the true source of evil. Rousseau and the Romantics said that it was culture in distinction from nature. Freud and the psychoanalysts said that it was authority figures in society or in our families.

[17:00] Marx said that it was economic forces. Heidegger and the existentialists said that it was technology and management. They all had something in creation that they pointed out and said, that's the true source of evil in our society.

And here's what Walter says. As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or to idolize some part of creation as the solution.

In other words, the core problems in our society are not social. They are not political. They are spiritual. And so what we need as a starting place for cultural renewal, we need spiritual solutions. We need spiritual solutions. You cannot hope to change a culture unless you confront the idols at the heart of that culture. So how does Paul go about confronting the idols in the culture at Athens? Now we're going to talk about this more next week in part two, but I just want to look at two things in closing. The first thing I want to look at is where Paul goes.

[18:11] He sees these idols. His heart is deeply moved. He's deeply troubled by these idols. And so where does he go? Well, he goes first to the religious centers.

He goes to the synagogues. And this is how we might think about going about the work of evangelism around 1950 in the U.S.

You go to the religious people, people who already assume that the Bible is important, people who are already somewhat familiar with the Bible, people who are primarily concerned about being a good person.

And so all you need to do is to prove text why Jesus is someone worth knowing and believing in, right? So that's the religious centers. But that's not all Paul does.

Paul then goes to the marketplace, the Agora, which is a very different scene entirely. The marketplace in Athens was the very center of cultural activity.

[19:05] This was the center for the arts and for philosophy and for all different kinds of media and for everything cultural. So if you imagine in our society gathering together all of the peer-reviewed journals, all of the bloggers, all of the TED talkers, all of the pundits, all the intellectuals, all of the op-ed columnists and filmmakers and artists and musicians, all of those people concentrated together in one place, you get a sense of what the marketplace was in Athens.

And so this is a place where no one cares what the Bible says. This is a place where no one wants to listen to your proof texts. But the point is this. In order to reach a culture, you have to go to all of the places where culture is created, not just the religious centers, but the secular institutions as

well.

And as we look at Christians in our culture over the last, oh, I don't know, 100 years, we see that evangelicals in particular have done a really good job of building an entire subculture.

There's a kind of evangelical Christian subculture in our country right now that includes Christian schools and Christian books and Christian music and Christian movies and Christian magazines and we even have a whole array of Christian celebrities, right?

Now this isn't all bad, but what's bad is that it has become increasingly ghettoized. It's completely irrelevant to the broader culture.

[20 : 44] And what we actually need, we need Christians who are in every sector of society. We don't just need Christian filmmakers making Christian films. We need Christians who make really good films that everybody's going to watch, right?

We don't just need Christian books. We need books written by Christians that everybody's going to read. We need Christians in politics. We need Christians in the media. We need Christians who are living faithfully as salt and light in all of the institutions where culture is created and shaped and preserved in our society.

Paul, I think, understands this on an intuitive level. So that's the first thing, where Paul goes.

Extremely important. We'll come back to that next week. The second thing, the last thing is, look at Paul's message.

Look at Paul's message to this culture. Verse 18 summarizes Paul's message. He was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. Man, I hope one day somebody summarizes my preaching that way. Yeah, I don't remember his jokes. I don't remember his stories. But I do remember this. He always talked about Jesus and the resurrection. I think that's the heart of all effective preaching. And there's a reason for this.

[21 : 55] He's not offering a new political system. He's not offering a new social theory. The core of his message is Jesus Christ and his resurrection. Now, why does that matter? Because idols cannot be removed.

You can't just pull an idol down. The only thing that you can do is to replace them with something else. They can't be removed. They can only be replaced.

And most of the time, our idols are simply replaced or displaced by other idols that we find even more compelling. And this is true for individuals.

It's also true for entire cultures. This is how cultures change. Because the idols at the core of the culture get displaced with other idols. And that's essentially what happens when we practice cultural imperialism.

Right? We go to a culture that holds certain things to be sacred. And we say, we want to displace those things with the things that we hold sacred. Right? Well, Thomas Chalmers talks about this.

[22 : 55] He's a Scottish preacher. He talks about this as the expulsive power of a new affection. And he gives this example. He says, imagine that you have an idolatrous love for pleasure and for instant gratification.

So that's your idol, instant gratification. But then one day, you begin to realize that it's possible to gain and to make lots of money. But it's going to require discipline. And so what you do is you allow that idol of instant gratification to be displaced.

And you begin to build and amass more and more and more wealth. So wealth becomes your new center. But then the wealthier you get, the more involved in politics you get.

And you begin to realize that wealth can actually be a ticket to gaining enormous amounts of power. And so then you're willing to spend all kinds of money on your campaign and all kinds of things in order to gain political power.

And so your wealth is then displaced by power. And if you look at this, what has actually happened is that you've swapped the idol of pleasure for the idol of wealth.

[23 : 56] And then you swapped the idol of wealth for the idol of power. But spiritually, nothing has changed. Maybe your priorities have changed. Maybe the way you spend your time and your money and your energy, who you hang out with.

All those things have changed. Maybe lots of behavioral changes. But your heart has not changed. You're still only a slave to idols like you always were. And so there's only one thing that can truly set human beings free from idolatry.

And this is the gospel. This is the core of Paul's preaching. The good news of Jesus and the resurrection. Because the truth about idols is this. They don't love you. They don't even know you exist.

They're oblivious to your existence. All they will do is make empty promises to you and then take what they can from you. Jesus Christ is the only one who loves you so much that he was willing to suffer for you.

He was willing to give his life for you so that he could set you free from idols by showing you what true love means. By, in his victory over sin and death, overcoming the spiritual powers and principalities that hold sway in this world.

[25 : 13] Setting you free to be adopted by the God who made you and to become his son or daughter and a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus' resurrection is a preview of God's plan for all of creation.

God actually intends to heal and to restore every aspect of his creation. Setting us free from idols and bringing everything under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

And so the invitation to give yourself to Jesus Christ and to worship him and to allow him to be the lord of your life rather than whatever idols hold sway now. That invitation is nothing short of the invitation to become part of the renewal of all creation.

So the Christian church is meant to be a preview of all of this. A new society where the world has an opportunity to see what family life, politics, business, race relationships, and all aspects of life.

What all of this looks like when it's brought under the lordship of Jesus Christ, our rightful king. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word and we thank you for your gospel.

[26 : 38] And we thank you, Lord, that even though we know we are constantly battling the temptation of idols, things that promise us the world. Lord, you're the only one who gave everything up for us.

And I pray that that truth would break our hearts, Lord. I pray that it would expose to us the emptiness of the things that we give our loyalty to. And I pray that you would begin to kindle in us an affection and a desire and a longing to see your kingdom come, Lord.

And it's in the name of your son, Jesus, that we pray. Amen.