

Substitute Gods

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[0:00] We're going to Exodus chapter 20, if you've got your Bibles, talking about substitute gods. And of course, this is a part of the Ten Commandments. And Moses spoke to the people as he came down from the mount.

And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God. I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth.

Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them. God says, thou shalt have no other gods before me.

It goes on to say, for I, the Lord thy God, am a jealous God. Idolatry, substitute gods. Now, we don't have lots of icons around us or statues or images or such things.

[1:14] But this goes much deeper than such a thing as that. He doesn't want our divided loyalty. He wants our loyalty.

He wants our devotion. And idolatry, really, it means to worship anything other than the one true God. So we don't have to go to some temple filled with statues and idols and images.

We can be just as guilty of idolatry ourselves. Because it's valuing something more than our Lord. It speaks of substitute gods, if you like.

Substitute gods. Something that's in the place of God in our life. A reformer of old said, whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that is your God.

It's what we cling to. What we're devoted to. Other than our Lord. It becomes like a God to us. And it takes his place. And he doesn't want that. He's a jealous God. Someone has said the God Moloch was an immense, fearful-looking monster with a huge red mouth.

[2:17] Fancy worshipping a God like that. One of the goddesses, so-called, of the Indians is a huge statue with a necklace of human skulls around her neck.

The Greeks had 30,000 gods and goddesses. And then, fearing lest they might miss one, they erected a statue to the unknown God. Just in case they missed out one of them.

And in our society, we think of idolatry, not so much the making of gods, of wood and of stone, of metal. But we tend to worship, let's face it, the modern gods of maybe chrome and steel.

Those that like to polish their cars more than the average. Which, maybe those TV screens, maybe it's whatever you might like to collect at home.

And you kind of spend undue time on it. Really, there's lots of idols, aren't they? They're worthless and vain. Those things that take our Lord's place. He wants that love, that devotion.

[3:22] A God of our own making. That's an idol. And it's a distraction, really. It takes the Lord's place. He's the one who wants our worship. Not some statues or images or all the trappings of our Western life that we live.

That takes his place. It takes his devotion that is due to him. He's a jealous God. Anything that takes the place of God in our life is an idol.

As I say, you don't have to go to some pagan temple where there's full of millions of gods, so-called. There's millions of gods all around us in the Western world, isn't there?

In Australia. And people can have all kinds of God replacements, if you like. It could be even the self. Or, you know, all that we might invest our time in.

Whether it's social media, the smartphones, keeping up with the Joneses. All the trappings of the life that we live, where we're chasing the almighty dollar. It tends to be the way, doesn't it?

[4:21] Just like the neighbour who doesn't know the Lord next door to us. It's about how and who, what we bow down to. What do we bow down to?

God told Elijah, when he thought he was all alone in the world, the last man standing. He says, There's believers who want to serve the Lord, and we may not realise they're out there. But there's those that have bowed down to Baal, and kissed him, as it were, worshipped him. Many people try and use all kinds of counterfeits, let's face it, to replace God in their lives. God's substitute God's, really false God's. It's what they adore, rather than God. And let's be honest, sometimes we can be guilty. I know I can, I have been. Even when it might be even supposedly seemingly good things. Sometimes they can become our idols. But really substitute God's are weak and ineffective.

[5:31] Unreal God's. Consider the vanity of idols, the making of statues and images to worship. The word of God is very plain about such things.

In Psalm 135 it says, The idols of the heathen are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they speak not. Eyes they have, but they see not. They have ears, but they hear not. Neither is there any breath in their mouths. Wow, it's almost like, what's the point? And there's another record of a man taking a piece of wood and making it into an idol.

And then it just becomes firewood. That's the kind of value of it. The point of it. It's pointless. A Japanese warlord in ancient Japan in the 1500s, he commissioned a great huge statue for Buddha for his shrine in Kyoto.

50,000 men laboured five years to build this temple and this statue, this colossal statue. And the work was scarcely completed when an earthquake struck in 1596 and the shrine came crashing down and wrecked the statue.

[6:41] And in a rage, this Japanese warlord, Hideyoshi, however you say it, he shot an arrow at the fallen colossus.

And he said, I put you here at great expense and you can't even look after your own temple. It's like the statue couldn't look after its own temple. I know there's images you can see on the internet of when there's flooding and they're carrying the statues of their idols from the temples to keep them safe from the floodwaters.

Because the idols can't protect themselves. The idols can't help themselves. So what help are they to us? Of course, they're no help at all. We can't put our hope in a statue.

But in the living God. The true and living God. He wants our worship. And I know some might well meaningly bow down to an image.

But really, God doesn't want that. He doesn't want us to worship a picture or a representation. He wants us to worship the real thing. Himself. Worship in spirit and in truth.

[7:46] It's time to mean business with God. Because false gods are all around us. False worship. Baal was a common false god in Bible days. Actually, idolatry is alive and well today.

Now, some of you have heard me say this before. It's something that's quite amusing in a way. But it's real. And it's true. Because nowadays, we don't have bail. But we've got foot bail.

Soccer bail. Basket bail. Base bail. You might like to play some golf bail. Or there's tennis bail. That's pretty popular, isn't it?

At the moment. Or volley bail. I'm just kind of... It's amusing in a way. But it's true, isn't it? Sport becomes kind of like a god to people. It's like it takes over their lives. It's something that consumes them.

It takes mastery over their lives. They virtually worship in these stadiums of masses of people. The sports fans and the sports players. It's almost a great devotion and a time of worship.

[8:47] It's a holy time. They even sing hymns like Tom was saying. You know, it's kind of a worshipful atmosphere. An emotional time. As they worship with great devotion.

And there's huge emotion and loyalty. And people obsess as they talk about their team. Oh, I'm going to wear my colours. Put the beanie on and the scarf and the...

You know, wear the colours. Because it's like, oh, there's such an emotion about it. Such an atmosphere. Practically worship, isn't it?

And they talk about their star players. Whoa. He's so good. She's so good. This great sports player. They can kick that ball through those posts better than anybody else can.

Big deal, honestly, isn't it? It's not to denigrate those that might, you know, have a love for sports that may be not going beyond the border.

[9:51] But honestly, it can, can't it? We can go overboard. Where we practically worship those sports teams. And they take over the place of fellowship at times with God's people. People gather together every week for one cause.

Clapping, singing, worshipping. Sport. And they donate their hard-earned money and their time. They'll fly to the other side of the continent to go and watch their team play.

And in some homes, sports has become the household god. People order their lives around it. It controls them. They say, oh, we can't make it to church because there's a sports tournament on. We can't get to such and such a church meeting because we've sports practice on. We can't let the team down. Yeah. Yeah. It could it be we've forsaken God?

For some, it's all they think about, talk about. This love of sports. It consumes people. The Lord's Day has become the sports day. It's good for us to recognise and get rid of the idols in our life.

[10:55] Now, my idol wasn't sport growing up. But I had idols. I had things that I put my devotion into, my time into, my money into. And I've told this story before.

People would have heard it. And I just had this love of aviation and of planes and aeroplanes and war, books about war and tanks and soldiers and stuff like that.

And I had whole bookcases full. And I was learning. A friend was a pilot and he gave me all his pilot books so I could learn how to fly because I had ambitions to be a pilot.

But it took over my life. It took over my life. And other things too. I had hobbies of stamps and stones and collecting medals and all kinds of little things like that.

But it consumed me. It consumed my life. It was like an idol to me. And I came to a turning point in my life where I thought, I'm going to get rid of all this junk. Because it's taking God's place.

[11:54] It's taking his, the devotion that I should give unto him. And so I just took it all down the op shop one day. And there was wheelbarrows full of it. And I just got rid of it.

Because it was an idol to me. And I saw it for what it was. Now you might have all kinds of things, hobbies and interests. I'm not saying necessarily that's for you. But for me, that was the turning point for me.

Where I said, no, I'm going to, it's going to the trash. Because it's taking God's place. It's a hindrance to my spiritual life. It's an idol to me. And friends, idols can take all kinds of pictures and forms and fashions.

It could be fame. It could be success. Or striving for comfort. For financial gain. For that success, as the world would call it.

And people want more and more stuff. They can't get enough stuff. And their lives are filled with, filling their lives with more and more stuff. They can't make money. Some can make money and material things they got.

[12:54] It's not that it's wrong to try to better yourself, to support your family. It's needful. But when it becomes this idol, it's a dangerous thing.

There's a story told of a miser who had a secret basement where he hoarded large sums of silver and gold. And he came often to look over the money and count it. And gloat over it.

And pour it through his fingers. And one day, he was in this basement. As in America, they have these underfloor rooms. And this basement, suddenly the strong wind blew and the door shut behind him.

The door of the secret basement. And there was the spring lock there that could only be turned from the outside and fastened the door. So the miser was shut in with his gold and his God.

Years later, when the old house was being torn down, some men came across his skeleton, stretched over the silver and the gold. He'd made money, his God.

[13:58] And the God had finally destroyed him. Idolatry. One of the most prominent forms of idolatry is a preoccupation with material things.

Friends, this world is passing. Passing. I know someone I know has attended a couple of funerals. And there's one more because another friend has died.

Someone that you might know, Theo. The man Theo who attended here has passed away. And it struck this man. Three people dying in his family and his neighbour.

Life is a vapour, people. Life is a vapour. Thank God Theo, as far as I know him, he had faith in Christ. He had that faith. That's what counts.

Not all this stuff. Not all this stuff of life. Idolatry is not necessarily having things but a preoccupation with them. That our lives get so consumed. This addiction.

[14:55] I want more. I want this. I want that. I've got to have the latest, the greatest, the most high tech. The top of the range. And you strive. You spend your life. Pour your life into it.

And it's vain. Empty. The Bible says, love not the world. Neither the things that are in the world. If anyone love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life, is not of the Father. It is of the world. And the world passeth away.

And the lust thereof. But he that doeth the will of God abideth forever. Friends, we can all worship things. They take God's place. See them for what they are.

Identify them for yourself. Love, the idols that you have might be different from the idols that I have or had. Could be completely different. It might not be sport.

[15:54] Don't get me wrong. You might be, you might just be a, someone who loves watching a particular game on whatever. It doesn't have to be an idol to you. But it can be.

It can become an idol. Many people, they can worship their children, their businesses, their field, their fields. Some worship cows, serpents, beetles, crocodiles.

But what do we worship in the West? Other things, aren't we? The average worldling worships heroes, movie stars, athletes, entertainers, beauty queens.

You know, some people plaster their, I know, I pick on my sister sometimes and they have the Bay City rollers on their wall. All these posters of these ugly looking men dressed in dresses.

I mean, people can worship all kinds of things, all kinds of rubbish. Such that they've got these film stars or movie stars or pop stars on their bedroom walls.

[16:56] And they virtually are worshippers of such. People worship what they love. What they trust. What they joy in. Sometimes it can be a job.

We can worship our job, our business, our career. Now, there's nothing wrong with a job, a business or a career. But it's just when it takes over our life.

It obsesses us and it hinders our walk with God. Some will pour their lives into a profession, into an enterprise to become the biggest and best in their knowledge of something.

That's okay. Sure enough, it's okay to work hard. We should work hard. But don't neglect your spiritual life in the process. Don't neglect your spiritual life because of other things.

The love of other things. Jeremiah chapter 9. Thus saith the Lord. Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom.

[17:54] Neither let the mighty man glory in his might. Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth glory in this.

That he understandeth and knoweth me. That I am the Lord which exercise loving kindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, saith the Lord.

There's only one who's due our worship and glory. People sadly can have zeal, but not according to knowledge. We can fill our, we can pour our lives out in stuff that really is just going to evaporate.

And we'll leave it behind. The moths, the dust, the rust, it's all going to corrode and waste away and be gone.

But what about eternal things? Let's not pour our lives out in vain worship. Let's not pour our lives out in vain. Let's not pour our lives out in vain. Let's not pour our lives out in vain. I came to a turning point in my life.

[19:04] Those various hobbies and interests that I had. They were taking me away from my devotion to the Lord. And I had to shift the focus. Focus had to shift.

What does the Lord want from me? Some can make their family, their children their God. There's a story about a heartbreaking story. A man who fatally shot himself in a phone booth. In his pocket there was a child's crayon drawing. And he wrote on it, Please leave this drawing in my coat pocket. I want it to be buried with me. The drawing was signed in a childish print by his little daughter who had perished in a fire.

Burnt to death not many months before. After her death the father seemed to have nothing further to live for. He put up these plaques in memory of his little girl at the school.

And he says, Maybe in 10 or 20 years someone will see one of these plaques and will wonder who Shirley Lee was. Perhaps they will say someone must have loved her very dearly. And surely we can sympathise with that heartbroken father.

[20:07] Many of us have little girls, little children, loved ones. And to see them perish would be so heartbreaking. But for this man, this little daughter became the centre of his existence.

His whole life's meaning and purpose was to this flesh and blood creature like himself. And that was wrong. It was wrong. That he came to that place where it became like an idolatry for him.

We can love things and people without it becoming an idol. But let's not take that place of obsession. Of replacing God's devotion that he calls us to.

We don't bow down before some image to worship that. But there is a tendency in all of us to worship that which is less than him.

That which is in place of him. The one who ought to have our full devotion. The one who should be the object of our affection. People worship what they apply their energy to.

[21:10] They've got a desire to invest their lives. And some invest their lives in vain pursuits and endeavours. So let's check carefully. Let's identify.

Is there idols in me? In my life? As Paul exhorted. Wherefore my dearly beloved. Flee from idolatry. Run from it. People worship what consumes their thoughts.

What they desire and covet after. Their materialistic desires. Paul warns elsewhere. 2 Timothy 3.4. The people will be lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.

What matters people? What matters? Honestly. Honestly. Is it this modern materialistic way of life? That might give us some passing pleasure?

The pursuit of that? Is it that ideal car you've got your heart set on? That the golf course?

[22:09] Whatever it be. I'm not saying if you play golf you're sinful. But it's just what's your heart set on? What's obsessing you? What's taking your time? Your devotion?

Your energy? That you're always thinking of that? Rather than the eternal? Is it that which gives you a charge?

That gives you that temporary satisfaction? That craving for pleasure? Or it doesn't matter what he wants for you. He wants. He wants you.

He wants your love. He wants your wholehearted love. Not some half-hearted thing. Idolatry truly is vanity. And younger ones here today, your life is ahead of you.

God willing, you've got more years to live than I have. It says, remember now, thy creator, in the days of thy youth. Don't put it off till you're old and grey and cranky. In the days of thy youth, remember now, thy creator, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

[23:20] Make the decision early. Make it now. Make it today. We must not bow down to idols. Choose to honour God with your life. We think of the Hebrew teenagers that were faced with the king's ultimatum as their pagan names were given, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

And they said, we would rather burn than bow down. They said, look, everybody's doing it. It's easy. Just bend the knee.

Put your head down. And it's got to be fine and dandy for you. But they said, no, king, we cannot bow down. We cannot bow down to your statue. We will stand.

Bow or burn. What are we going to do? They said, we will not bow. We will not bow down to your idol. They were uncompromising.

We bow down to the living God, not to some fake God. Let's rather be wholehearted after God. Friends, the word of God says this. It says, trust in the Lord with all thine heart.

[24:31] Lean not on to thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths. It says, fear the Lord and depart from evil.

It shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones. Trust in the Lord. Let him direct your paths. Idolatry has always been a sin that has plagued mankind right from the early stages.

The forefathers of Abraham worshipped idols. The children of Israel were surrounded by idols. The Assyrians, the Canaanites. They were constantly exposed to all kinds of idolatry.

And it blows your mind to think, even at this, where Exodus 20 was given, they were dancing around this golden calf and praising this golden calf for taking them out of Egypt.

What a reproach. What a shameful thing. This once miraculously redeemed, delivered from Egypt. Go and make a calf and bow down.

[25:33] And it says that they were dancing around it. It was like a great big festival. Just a reproach that they would give their praise to a golden calf when they should have praised the living God and been faithful to him.

And in our day, millions worship idols of all descriptions. There's, of course, the sun that bow down to the sun, moon and stars. But friends, us Westerners, us Aussies, we are just as much an idolatrous people as ever has been.

And we've got to ask for ourselves, personally. Are there idols in my life that I need to throw out? Are there any false gods that he would find in me?

Ask God to help you break down every idol. Cast out every such thing. Idolatry can creep up on us. We don't even realise that we're an idol worshipper.

We can have hidden idols. The idols of the heart. It's been said the human heart is like an idol-making factory. That we just can't help it. It's just we manufacture idols. We make other gods.

[26:53] And they're in our own image. But we're called to have no other gods. He doesn't want you to have the idols. And, you know, there's pictures of them having the household idols that they kind of hid.

And they kind of had a backup god. A substitute god. They made the show that they were worshippers of God.

But they had these idols. And sometimes they hid them. But he says, thou shalt have no other gods before me. So we should renounce our idols.

Again, John says the same as Paul. Let all children keep yourselves from idols. Amen. It's a repeated theme. It's in the Old Covenant, the Old Testament, and it's in the New Testament. It's right through the book. That we ought to forsake the idols that we have in our lives. Of Hezekiah, it says, that he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord.

[27:55] He removed the high places and he broke the images. And it says he cut down the groves, these places of worship to the idols.

And he broke in pieces the brazen serpent that Moses had made. For unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it. And he caught it in a hush town.

So even that brazen image that God told the people to make, which was an emblem, a symbol of Christ lifted up.

The one who could heal us from our most dread disease of sin. That itself became an idol. So even that, which was a representation of Christ on the cross.

It was right that Hezekiah said they should break it and destroy it. So even that which might seem to have some holy, even a godly thing, like a picture of Jesus.

[29:02] I know some, there's times when I had a crucifix. It came to a point where actually the Bible says don't make it. Don't make a graven image.

And we should break it in pieces. Like Moses, sorry, like Hezekiah said to do. And he was praised for this. Hezekiah, he was only one, only two kings in history set themselves to follow God's command.

To tear down the high places, the places of idol worship. Hezekiah was one. And then years later, Hezekiah's great-grandson, Josiah, he took the throne as a youngster to find they'd rebuilt these

places.

They'd reintroduced the idolatry. And so Josiah, it says in 2 Kings 23, 3, it says that he made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord. To keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all their heart and all their soul.

Hezekiah and Josiah did the right thing. They broke in pieces. They destroyed. They cut down the idol worship places.

[30:13] What about you and me? Can we be like Hezekiah and Josiah? What is that obstacle that stands between us and our God? Those things that take his due devotion and adoration, smash them to pieces.

Cut them down. Chop them up. Grind them to dust. Obliterate every speck of them. Could it be our pride?

Could it be those preoccupations? Whatever it be. You might have your list of those things that preoccupy you. That consume your thinking, your affections, your energies, your actions.

Anything that takes your eyes off of God. What is the priority for you? What is your treasure? Idol worship was a great threat to the Israelites' purity.

God said destroy it. He's jealous. He's jealous. It says covetousness is as idolatry. We can be just so selfish that we're coveting.

[31:19] It's idolatry. It's the activity of the human heart. We can turn anything into an idol. That which we give our highest affection to.

Worship. Could be a person, a relationship, a job, a career, a house, social standing. Affections. Affections.

Possessions. Hobbies. Pets. Lifestyle. You name it. False loves. Things that can get in the way. And we need to recognise that and get them out of the way.

So friends, there's lots we could think about. And for you, the things that God might be pointing out to you might be different. It might be totally something I've not even talked about.

And the things I've talked about may not be an idol for you. But what do we spend ourselves, what do we expend our lives on? And recognise that as an idol to be got rid of.

[32:17] So friends, to wrap up Colossians 3, Paul says, If you then be risen with Christ, and you are, he says, seek those things.

Seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. And set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

For ye are dead and your life is hid with Christ in God. In closing, what do we love? We can love all manner of things, and they're good things, and healthy and wholesome things.

But our highest love, our highest devotion, our absolute and ultimate, unreserved worship should be unto him who sits on the throne. He's holy, he's righteous, he's jealous.

And he calls us to a wholehearted worship of himself. He says, thou shalt have no other gods before me. None. He commands us to this. So will we yield to him?

[33:21] Will we turn from any substitute gods to the real God, the true God? He's the true and living God. Let us pray. Lord, we thank you that at the cross you paid for our sin.

You rose again. You can be our living saviour. Lord, we pray each one might know that grace, that faith that you call us to, to trust not in any other thing.

Not to walk after any other god. Not to worship any other thing. Not to have a devotion and affection that takes your due place.

Lord, help us to have that love that says, I will love you above and beyond any other thing, any other person, anything that I might value.

Lord, that I would esteem you, that you are preeminent. You are the absolute. You are the ultimate. And Lord, we don't want to give any place to other things that would take your rightful place.

[34:28] Lord, we pray if there's any yet to trust you, that even by faith now they'll say, Lord Jesus, save me. I trust you now for my saving, that you died for me.

And I trust you paid my sin debt fully then. And I receive that. Lord, each one, help us to value, truly value, and truly focus on you for everything you are to us.

And help us, Lord, not to neglect that we would fail to see you are a jealous God, and you're rightly so. You deserve our wholehearted love, not half of it, not a half-hearted love.

Work on us, we pray, by your Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.