

Vision of Allegiance

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[0 : 00] In the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, there was a string of very wealthy CEOs, money managers, executives, who all committed suicide.

The ultimate thing in their life, the God of money and wealth, had been revealed. And not only had it been revealed, it had been taken away.

And without the ultimate, most important thing in their life, their lives had no meaning, no hope. This is idolatry, where we take something from God, even something good, and we make it the ultimate thing in our lives.

And we worship it. But these are just fake, counterfeit gods that leave us open to despair if we chase them. Similarly to the global financial crisis, a pandemic can reveal our fake, counterfeit gods as well.

Will I choose to wear a mask? Will I choose to limit my freedoms? Or will I prefer to sacrifice other people's lives and other people's freedom because of my own goals, my own God of personal freedom?

[1 : 16] When everything is stripped back, the most important thing, our idols, the ultimate thing in our life, is revealed. Now when I talk about idols, you might actually be thinking of a literal idol.

You might be thinking of a statue you've seen. You know, a statue to the god in Egypt. I was talking about Hydra last week. And you might be thinking of, you know, great Egyptian Roman gods.

But when beauty and body image becomes the ultimate thing in our life, it's not that different to worshipping Aphrodite, the god of beauty. When money and career are made the ultimate thing in our lives, it's like we are bowing down to Ares, the god of war, and Artemis, the god of wealth.

We all have a worship problem. The human heart is constantly tempted to worship things like a successful career, love, possessions, even our family.

They become the center of our lives because we think if we can get them, if we can hold on to them, they can give us significance and security and fulfillment. Today, as we continue in the book of Revelation, we see the battle before us.

[2 : 37] The battle between Christians and those who are set against Christians. We see the devil send two different beasts to tempt people to worship him instead of God.

And we see these two beasts as just gross parodies of God, parodies of his goodness, but they are counterfeit and fake.

But the problem is that we can be tricked into worshipping them instead of God. So please pray with me as we look at Revelation. Heavenly Father, we ask that you would be with us today as we consider the idols of our heart and the things that we worship.

Father, we ask that you would reveal them to us so we can give you the praise, Lord. Amen. The first thing as we look at idols that we worship is to actually define what worship is.

If worship is what we do with our hearts to make something the ultimate thing in our life instead of God, we need to know what it looks like. We could often speak about coming to a worship service.

[3 : 47] You know, that's what we do in church. We sing and we worship God. And we do do those things. But worship is far bigger than what we just do for an hour and a bit on a Sunday morning or later in the day.

Worship is something we actually do all the week, 24-7. I have two definitions of worship, a longer one and a shorter one.

A longer definition of what worship is from Don Carson. Worship is the proper response of all beings to God, giving honor and worth to the Creator because He is worthy.

Worship manifests itself both in adoration and in action, in the individual believer and in corporate worship. And Tim Keller, in a really helpful book called Counterfeit Gods, which I'll reference a

couple of times today, Tim Keller uses three words to define what worship is.

Love, trust, and obey. And so when we bring these two together, worship looks like love, trust, and obey. But love is an aspect of worship because it's something that we delight in, we adore, it's something that brings pleasure.

[5 : 05] We trust the things that we worship because it gives us a sense of control. And it provides my safety and obedience because worship shapes our lives and we follow the things that we worship.

We can love, trust, and obey God, but we also choose to love, trust, and obey other things, fake gods that our hearts make.

And we do this with all of our lives. So now that we have a definition of this, let's have a look at these two strange pictures of beasts before we consider worship of Jesus.

So we're going to see the power of the first beast before we see the seduction of the second beast. And so have your Bibles open with me at Revelation 13. John has seen a vision and he sees powers that tempt people to worship them instead of God.

And these beasts represent the military power of the time, the political and military powers. And so John in verse 1 sees a beast coming up out of the water.

[6 : 11] It's a beast depicting the Romans who would invade across the water. And they invaded across the Mediterranean to conquer Asia Minor, which is near modern day Turkey.

And this beast coming across the sea looks very powerful. Verse 1, it had 10 horns and 7 heads. With 10 crowns on its horns and each one a blasphemous name.

So these horns and these heads, it's a picture of power. It's powerful. It's been given power by the dragon, the devil. And it looks like an evil parody of Jesus.

Verse 3, one of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound. And the fatal wound had been healed. It's this picture of, it almost represents Jesus.

It's been wounded, but it's been healed. And we're going to see a number of ways that these beasts parody Jesus in an attempt to be worshipped. And the whole world has been won over by this beast.

[7 : 13] Verse 3 again, the whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast. And they also worshipped the beast and asked, who is like the beast?

Who can wage war against it? People had been filled with awe and wonder at Jesus. And yet here they've been tricked by the dragon and his beast.

So much so that they think his power is complete. They take a phrase used of God. Who is like God? Who can defeat him? And they use it of the beast.

That's the name we gave to our youngest son, Micah. It means, who is like God? Mike Yah is short for Mike Yahweh.

Who is like Yahweh? If your name is Michael here, that means, who is like Elohim? Mike L. And they take this, a name that's reserved for God, this praise that's deserved for God.

[8 : 09] Who is like God? Who has power over him? And they take the love and the trust and the obedience that is reserved for God. And they give it to this parody form of a beast.

It's not hard to imagine that at the height of Rome's powers, a cry being made like this. Who is like Rome? Who could possibly defeat Rome?

Who could defeat any other military power throughout the histories? Who could beat Britain in their pomp? Who could beat the US? Who could beat China? But this is an evil and false God that takes the place of our Heavenly Father.

It demands ultimate love and trust and obedience. Verse 8, all the inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast. This is a power that defines what's right.

It demands allegiance. It brings people who don't want to worship the new power into conflict. Because we already have an allegiance to God. And so there is conflict.

[9 : 15] And the result is that Christians are persecuted. Now, in Australia, we don't live in an idolatrous empire where the ruler must be worshipped like in Rome with the cultic practice about worshipping the emperor as God.

But there are many elements of idolatry. But there are many elements of idolatry in our society that our government encourages. Our government currently is using their power to redefine morality, to redefine what is right.

It redefines what the cultural touchstones that are to be worshipped, to be loved, trusted, and obeyed. They are in the process of redefining these areas of morality like euthanasia, abortion, gender, sexuality.

And in this environment, the threat to Christians is their power. The power of the state or the power of the employer, the power of the mob, or even the power of the online mob.

Worship the things that we worship. Value the things that we value. Love what we love. Trust what we trust. And you better obey, or you will be cancelled, and you will be pushed to the edges of society.

[10:30] Into this world, under this threat, John, verse 10, calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of God's people. Endure through opposition.

Christians have been enduring for 20 centuries. Powers come and go, but God is always sovereign. So the first beast comes with power.

But the second beast is much more subtle, much more seductive. Verse 11. Then I saw a second beast coming out of the earth.

It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. Again, this looks like another twisted parody of Jesus. It speaks for the dragon, but it looks like a lamb.

And that's the animal that represents Jesus. But this one represents the power of the beast and the dragon. But this beast is far more seductive.

[11:27] Verse 13. It performed great signs. It was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast.

It deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It uses signs and images to seduce and threaten and impress and overwhelm. In the Roman world, it was full of images of power.

But one of the most alluring and seductive ways it controlled people was through its access to wealth and prosperity. Verse 16. It forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads.

So that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. Now, there have been many different views over the years of what the mark of the beast would be.

Some thought it was a visa card when the credit cards first came in. Whether it's a barcode. Some have suggested it's a vaccine or even a computer chip. The word mark here was used for official stamps on documents.

[12:41] It was used for the impressions on a coin. So the coin has been marked with a Roman symbol. And it's most likely that John here is using this image to symbolize corrupt involvement in the Roman Empire.

If you want all of this goodness in the Roman Empire, if you want to access to the markets, to buy and to sell, to make a living, you will need our currency.

You will need our mark. In the first century, Rome would bring all of the young elites from the neighboring countries, from all over the empire, and seduce them with glory to win their hearts and mind.

And now, I don't know if you've seen the movie Monty Python's Life of Brian, but those considering what Rome had ever done, while they were trying to think of all the bad things they had done, said, apart from better sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and a fresh water system and baths and public order, what have the Romans ever done for us? Now, it's an entertaining scene, but it paints this picture of Rome brings seductive beauty. Come and share the bounty of Rome, because everything Rome has is good.

[13:59] There's just one problem. You'll have to sell your soul to do it. You'll have to worship the emperor as God. You'll have to live as if he is in control of all things. You can have wealth and comfort, but you are just worshipping the emperor at the love of comfort and the love of wealth.

They become what you love and you trust and obey. These two beasts demand allegiance and worship. They do it in different ways. It's the old carrot and the stick type of motivation.

The first beast brings the stick of power. It comes to beat people into obedience, whereas the second beast comes with the carrot of seduction, of money and influence.

If beating you won't work, we'll seduce you with other ways. The first beast came by sea. It's a picture of the Roman armies invading across the ocean.

But the second beast came out of the earth. It's a picture of the countries that came under Roman control, and then they became the propaganda machines. They became the ones who would tell everybody else, it is great being under Rome.

[15:13] Come, submit yourselves to Rome. We've taken all of their money. We have to worship their emperor. Come. It's country's peer pressure. In the face of this more subtle and seductive temptation, John says in verse 18, this calls for wisdom.

Reject the seductive call of the things of this world. Worship only Jesus. The beasts parody God. Fire comes from heaven.

They do signs and wonders like Jesus and the apostles. They worship the beast who was wounded yet lives like Jesus the lamb. The second beast causes an image to speak, just like Christians speak the word of Christ.

And even the threefold relationship of the dragon and the two beasts is a twisted parody of the Trinity. This beast preaches an alternate gospel.

Don't worship God. Don't love him. Don't trust him. Don't obey him. Instead, through a thousand glossy magazines, Instagram influencers, ads, a million drips, the beast says, all of this could be yours if you bow down and worship me.

[16:29] Every moment of peer pressure from the world to love and obey and trust anything other than God. Jesus said, no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other or you'll be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve both God and money. Our total worship of God gets compromised. It influences our Christianity where we are no longer comparing ourselves to Jesus and reflecting on his love, but we judge each other by the world's standards.

Putting our love and trust and obedience in a fake God is not just a bad choice, but it's also dangerous. Counterfeit things are dangerous.

I read this week about some disastrous fake and counterfeit products. Beware of fake makeups and perfumes because they can contain antifreeze, arsenic, methanol, and even urine.

Counterfeit batteries can get to extreme temperatures and even explode. And I read about a family in Tennessee who had bought one of... Have you seen those little...

[17:38] I don't know if it's actually a hoverboard, but one of those little motorized hoverboard type things. They bought a really cheap version of that and it exploded and set the house on fire. Being seduced to worship ourselves and cheap idols sets us up for a lifetime of chasing unsatisfying goals and damaged relationships.

In the midst of this vision of these two beasts, John is given a new vision. Chapter 14, verse 1. Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

John sees Jesus with his people. 144,000, the complete amount of his people. He's standing on a mountain, a picture of power, and his people have been marked.

They've been marked with God's name. And they are described as virgins. Those who did not defile themselves, they have kept their love and their trust and their obedience pure.

In Revelation, in the Bible, sin and immorality is often pictured with spiritual adultery, worshipping another God. And so Jesus standing with virgins is a picture of those who have been faithful to him.

[19:02] Those who have been kept free from the seduction of power and money. And they sing and they praise Jesus. They've been marked. We're the beast marked people for access to the glories to seduce them leading to destruction.

God's people have been marked for the inclusion into the glories of God's kingdom. In Revelation chapter 13 and 14, we're presented with these two options of worship.

There are only two options. We can worship the one who deserves it, the God who made the universe, the God who has made all things, who sent his son to die for us, who loves us, who brings us into his family.

Or we can worship the dragon and his beasts. We can worship the fake and dangerous gods, the gods of our hearts. There are only these two options.

In corporate worship here at church at St. Paul's, we call each other to worship God and not to worship anything else. We call each other to beware the subtle influence of empty and destructive idols, to give undivided allegiance to God.

[20 : 14] We call each other to beware of syncretism, where religion is mixed, where worship of God is mixed with other things. Just like we wouldn't go from here to our mosque to worship another God, but we would go from here straight to Westfield or the Mandarin Center to buy things that we think will feed our souls, to buy, to worship our cravings for expensive food, to worship the cravings for technology to distract us from the reality of the world around us.

Idolatry is the reason for all of our sin. This is why the first commandment is, I am the Lord your God and you will have no other gods before me. Sin is where we make something else God, a counterfeit God that we worship.

So we need to identify these gods of our hearts. We need to figure out what are the things that we worship in our lives so we can pull them up by the root and throw them into the fire.

Tim Keller has four helpful questions for us from the book Counterfeit Gods. I'd really recommend it to you if you're wanting to read further into this. It's a really good book, fairly short read, but it's very helpful.

And he has four things to help us to question our gods. First of all, Keller says that the true God of your heart is what your thoughts effortlessly go to when there is nothing demanding your attention.

[21 : 48] What do you spend time thinking about that you think will bring you joy and comfort in the hidden spaces of your heart? You know, it's that five minutes when you're lying in bed at night just before you go to sleep and your mind just drifts.

What are you thinking about? Is it the holiday that's coming up that you think that will give you peace and rest and that will be happy, that will bring you joy? Is it the work that you need to do tomorrow so that you can be in control?

What is it that your heart goes to? What are you thinking about? One or two thoughts is not necessarily an idol, but what do we habitually come back that we think will bring our joy if we give it our love and our obedience and our trust to?

The second thing to do is to get at your bank statement, have a look at your bank statement online, and see where has your money been going. Your money flows easiest to your heart's greatest love. If God is your greatest love, then giving away money will be easy. Money will flow easily to ministry, to charity, to the poor. You will see that call from James earlier to support the cleanse officers, and you'll be like, yes, I'm going to support this.

[23 : 07] Most of us, however, our money flows to clothing, food, alcohol, our cultures, status symbols, cars, houses, shiny technology.

Question your bank statement. Where is my money going? The third way to identify the ultimate thing in our life, the fake gods, is to see how you respond to unanswered prayer.

What have you been praying for that you haven't gotten an answer to? Is God the most satisfying? Is God the ultimate thing in your life? Or are you looking to him to give you what you want?

Is God just someone you pray to to get what you want? And when you don't get it, you respond with despair and anger. How do you respond to unanswered prayer?

And finally, the fourth question comes from our uncontrolled emotions. If you're angry, ask, well, where is my anger coming from? Is there something so important to me?

[24 : 13] I will have to have it at all costs. If you're fearful, ask, am I scared because the ultimate thing in my life is being threatened?

Ask these four questions. What are you daydreaming about? Where is your money going? What are you praying about? And how do you respond to unanswered prayer?

And where are your painful emotions? Ask these four questions to find where our idols are hiding and then pull them up. Question the daydreaming. Is loving and putting my trust and obeying the pull of this thing actually going to make me happy?

Do I actually have to get this job promotion, this thing, to feel significant? Now, once we pull them up, we actually have to replace them or new idols will grow.

They must be replaced with Jesus. Paul in Colossians 3 encourages us to set our hearts on things above. We must move our love and our trust and obedience of a fake God to Jesus.

[25 : 21] Jesus must become more beautiful to our hearts. To rejoice in him is to treasure him. Sit and meditate on him. Assess his value. That he would be so wonderful that he would die for us.

Reflect on his beauty and importance until your heart rests. Rejoice in Jesus until your heart lets go of its grip on idols and holds only to Jesus.

When we worship God as the ultimate thing in our lives with our love and our trust and obedience, then we can have peace. When a global financial crisis hits again, when another pandemic hits, and our health and our wealth are threatened, then we will see that we can stand secure in Christ because he won't be threatened.

Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, Lord, I thank you for Revelation 13 and 14.

Lord, I ask that you would help reveal our idols, the fake gods that we build up in our hearts. Lord, fill us with your spirit so that you would help us to pull out these weeds of the things that we worship, to replace them just with the worship of you, Lord.

[26 : 50] Father, we ask that we would do this so that you would have all the glory, that you would have the praise every moment of our lives, not just when we gather here on Sunday, but that you would be praised through every moment of our lives, Lord.

Amen. Amen.