

“FLEE FROM IDOLATRY.”

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Scripture Texts: I John 5:20-21; I Corinthians 10:12-14; Colossians 3:1-6

Introduction.

We have already mentioned that verse 13 seemed like a natural ending to this letter. Even verse 20 could have worked. He could have ended, little children, love Jesus, walk in the light, love your brother. Or he could have ended this letter the way he ends his next two letters, II John and III John, saying he has much more to say but hopes to come in person, face to face. So why this strange, unexpected concluding command added onto the end of I John?

This is the only letter in the NT to end with an abrupt command.

If we look at the context we get some clues for this ending.

Larger context.

John is living in and writing to churches that live and breathe a culture of idolatry. Idols of every kind abounded. There were great temples built to all kinds of great gods.

In Ephesus there was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. Civilization revolved around Greek and Roman gods, cultic practices were everywhere present.

Specific context.

In verse 20 John declared Jesus Christ is true God and eternal life. If there is one true God, then there are also false gods, counterfeit god. If there was no God, there would be no gods.

So it is appropriate to for John to call us to know and love and worship the true God and to make a strong warning against idols.

Furthermore, even though this is John's only use of the word idol in this letter, in a sense John has been battling against idolatry the whole letter, against false preachers and false teachers prompting a false religion and a false god.

They have been prompting a false Christ, who didn't come in the flesh, who didn't die on the cross for our sins, who doesn't preach a message of obedience.

So this is simply a closing charge not to listen to or believe or worship what they are promoting. Don't buy what they are selling, it is snake oil.

One other note about context. It is interesting the three other places in this letter where John is warning about what is false in the church and in the world, we starts with saying, "Little children" (I John 2:12-17; 3:7-10; 4:1-6). These are the warnings of a tender, loving father, a shepherd pastor who cares deeply for his flock. Listen, take this to heart, heed his warnings as from a wise, godly, God-fearing father.

Idols and idolatry.

Is this really a topic of concern in our modern, sophisticated day and age?

Worshipping idols is inevitable. The very first commandment deals with idolatry.

Notice there is no third option. We don't worship nothing. Everyone worships something. Why is that? Because we were created to worship and we were all created to worship God. So the only way for us not to worship God is to come up with God-substitutes, counterfeit gods.

We all have a built in worship center or altar, our hearts. We are all innately religious.

There are only two religions in the world, only two Gods, only two ways to worship, either the creator God or an idol substitute. The true God or a false god.

Every person, every family, every community, every nation, every system of belief, every worldview is either focused on or based on God or on a God substitute. There is no secular society, they have a god, an idol, something that is supreme, of greatest value and importance.

Adam and Eve put something else in place of God, the desires of their eyes/flesh. They wanted to be God or like God.

They chose an alternative path by their own wisdom and making. Ever since man has been inventing and making endless idols and religions which are in essence all the same, a man-made substitute for God, a means of salvation of his own making, by his own works, golden calves out of the fire.

As John Calvin famously said our hearts are idol factories.

It is the fundamental, foundational sin, the sin from which all other sin flows.

Idolatry is why we do wrong things, why we sin, why we do anything contrary to the Word of God. We never break commandments number 2 through 10 without breaking the first one first.

We sin because there is something we want more than God and His will and His Word.

What is an idol?

There are the physical idols made of stone, metal, wood, something very tangible that you actually bow down to and make sacrifices to. Other religions have these. Idols, shrines, god and goddess figurines. You can go to China and see the worship in front of giant bronze Buddhas or go to India to see the Hindu shrines of every corner. You can buy Hindu and Buddhist idols and goddesses on Amazon.

But today in our culture most people don't bow down to religious objects of wood, stone or metal, so what is an idol for us? For us our idols are *idols of the heart*.

An idol is any immoderate or inordinate love, affection, desire, zeal for something/someone more than or over God. Idolatry is anything you love, desire, enjoy and pursue or seek in order to gain control, comfort, approval or pleasure from other than God and Christ.

Idols are like scarecrows. They are meant to help us, do us some good, protect us, keep bad things away or from happening. But they are under our control. We make them, set them, serve them, use them. They are tame, user-friendly. They don't talk back to us or rebuke us or tell us what to do.

Why are idols dangerous?

Ephesians 5:5 For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

Colossians 3:5–6 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

How serious is this sin? It is a grave and serious sin, because it puts us in the greatest spiritual danger. It can cost you heaven, it can keep you out of God's presence.

What would you do if you were told there was someone in your house who wanted to kill you?

You would do whatever was necessary to get rid of this person. So the apostle Paul is telling us there is someone in your heart out to kill you, to cause you to lose your inheritance in heaven. It is idols and idolatry.

If your heart is a house with many rooms, there are idols lurking in the dark corners of every room. They are in the dark, they dwell in secrecy, most don't even know they are there, and don't acknowledge they have any.

Second Commandment says God is a jealous God, He tolerates no adultery, no unfaithfulness. God takes unfaithfulness personally. His jealousy is a reflection of His intensely personal love.

Idolatry is spiritual adultery.

Consider a married couple. They will tolerate many, many sins in each other, but unfaithfulness is a most serious breach and break to the marriage covenant. Few marriages survive such a sin.

So it is with idolatry, it is an act of great unfaithfulness to God, a serious breach of our covenant. The OT calls it whoring after other gods.

What do they look like today?

How can you keep yourself from idols or watch out for idols if you don't know what they look like? Would you know one if you saw one? Are there any idols in your heart?

Most of us have had our idols for so long we have become friends with them, we are comfortable with them, they aren't that bad, so what's the harm?

First, we make an idol of our self, we love and honor and esteem and care about ourselves above all others. We are self-seeking, we desire self-approval and applause. We consider ourselves wiser than God. We prefer our will over God's will. We make our stomach, our appetites, our lusts and our pleasures our god.

We serve them, seek them, make provisions for them. We give to them what is due to God.

Second, we make God's gifts and grace into idols.

Idols can be bad things or good things or good gifts from God that are turned into a god, into something more desirable or satisfying than God (money, work, sex, marriage, children).

Third, some make people idols, spouse, children, grandchildren, relatives, friends, who you know. You love them more than God, and set your highest affections on them. You fear their loss. You depend on others more than God, look to them for approval.

Fourth, some make enemies their god, something they fear more than trust God. Think they are more powerful than God.

Money, sex, power, success, work, family, friends, sports, body, profit, pleasure, moral living, being good, appearances, what others think, clothes, hair, trucks, toys, TV, computer.

Idols of physical beauty

Political idols, what we put our hope or trust in

Sports idols, golf, hobbies, things we collect or make

Security idols, what gives us security

Racial idols, who is better

Approval idols, what gives me value and worth

Comfort idols, quality of life idols

Idols can be clean house, clean windows, manicured lawns.

Advertising speaks to idols, promotes idols, appeals to the idolatry of our hearts.

We can expose the idols of our hearts by honestly asking ourselves serious questions.

What do I need, want, love, fear, trust?

What do you value, admire, praise?

What makes us feel good, makes us feel better, better than others.

What thing if you lost it would take you down the most?

What are you living for? What do you seek for salvation, hope, life?

What is your hardest to control emotion? What makes you most angry, impatient, sad, depressed, afraid?

What would you miss most, hate to be without, fall apart if you didn't have?

What will make my life better?

What is absolute, what is ultimate?

What competes for your time and interest and affection?

What are your thoughts, where do they go most often, in idle moments, what occupies your thoughts, concerns, interests? Self, stuff, or God?

Do you find thoughts toward self and stuff, more pleasing or interesting than toward God?

Do we love them more than God?

Do we love them more than spiritual riches?

Do we desire them to increase more than we desire growth in grace?

Do we grieve their loss more than spiritual losses?

Do we enjoy the increase of them more than the increase of spiritual gifts?

Do we find more security in them than in God?

Do we not look up to or envy those with worldly riches more than those with spiritual riches?

Does the pursuit of worldly riches take precedence over the pursuit of spiritual gain or blessing?

Do we treasure them and keep them more tightly rather than use them for God's glory?

Do you love holiness more than the things of this world?

Do you love God above everyone else in your life?

Are you easily drawn to God or easily distracted from God?

What are you willing to sacrifice your children for?

How do we keep from idols?

First, we must have Jesus. We must know and love the true God. We must have the Gospel. We must have the Holy Spirit. We must have died to the old nature, our flesh, and come alive by the Spirit to the things of the spirit. We must be a new man with a new nature.

Second, we must agree with God about our sin and hate it. We must turn from all idolatry.

We must be constantly killing the flesh.

The root of sin in us is weakened by grace, but not eliminated completely, so we are in danger.

Colossians 3:5 is written to Christians:

Colossians 3:5–6 Put to death [mortify, kill] therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

The Christian hates them, fights them, continually resists, grieves over them, prays against them, begs for mercy and help. He flees from them and flees to Christ, hides under the blood of Christ.

This sin has been dethroned and there is a new king on the throne, but the rebels are still causing trouble in the kingdom.

There are no half measures. You can't compromise.

Some kings put up high places.

Some kings worshipped God but left high places alone.

A few kings tore down the high places.

King Hezekiah (II Kings 18), King Josiah (II Kings 23)

No partial steps. The only way to kill idols is through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We will live either by the Spirit of Christ or by the flesh, no other option.

Killing idols is by grace because the victory is already ours, and the strength is ours and the armor is ours and He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.

Use the means, the tools God has given you, prayer, Scripture, worship.

Preach the Gospel to yourself. The Gospel is the opposite of idolatry and the antidote to it.

The Gospel truly is enough. If we have the Gospel we have all we need for eternity.

Preaching truth to self, believing it, seeing it as the most soul-satisfying gift above all others. Seeing Jesus as enough, as the best, as the freedom from every other bondage.

To overcome the world culture we need a Gospel culture.

“We are worshipers, and we will find something to worship. Idolatry is killed by replacing idols with God, and that's the work God does for us in the gospel” (Beale).

Colossians 3:1-4 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. 3 For you have died, and your life is hidden with

Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

John says little children (other places beloved). We are God's children, loved by God, created to love God.

We become like what we worship, so John is calling us to become like God's children by worshiping Him and Him alone. As we worship our Father and his Son by the Spirit, we become like God.

Preach the Gospel to yourself.

Put the Gospel on replay in your mind.

Spiritual disciplines, means of grace.