

Dump Your False Gods Before They Fail

Transcribed from audio
February 22, 2010

Pastor Chip Fisher
Exodus 31:1-6; 21-24

Back in Biblical times they sure knew how to build temples dedicated to all those gods and goddesses they worshiped. One of the Seven Wonders of the World was the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. Archaeologists estimate there were 212 supporting marble columns—each one about 50 feet tall—in 106 pairs around the perimeter. The footprint of this temple was something like 200 by 400 feet. It took something some 120 years to build—that’s even longer than refurbishing the Port Theater.

We don’t build temples like that anymore. According to the American Religion Data Archives most recent survey, how many places of worship are there in the United States? Would you believe 250,402. I don’t doubt that’s the correct answer, but it’s a trick question.

I think there are hundreds of thousands more. How about those steel and glass towers with the cubicles and some of them that have nice black executive chairs? Millions stream into them every day, hoping to find their ultimate purpose, their security. They give the best of their time and their energy, forsaking their health and loved ones. They don’t know it, but it’s their temple. How about those buildings with the big vaults and safety deposit boxes and the lines you stand in? How many derive their primary sense of purpose from those buildings? They trust their welfare will come from what they deposit; they make big sacrifices. They don’t know it, but that’s their temple. And don’t forget all those buildings, those rooms with the mirrors around the walls, the weights clanging, the treadmills whirring. Millions have eating disorders, don’t they? They have serious complexes, afraid their bodies might not appear as perfect as they desire. They worship their appearance. They don’t know it but that’s their temple. For other people, their temple could be the shopping mall, the race track, the football stadium, the theater, the pick-up bar, the cell phone.

No doubt about it, we are a worshipping people. It’s part of being human, isn’t it? We have our fears, we have our vulnerabilities, we have our needs, we have the desire for something more, something to stand taller than everything else. We have to give our allegiance to something, we have to sacrifice to something, to derive our sense of our identity from something to which we look desperately somewhere for our happiness in life. At least in the Bible times these false gods fought fair. You could see them, you could hold them, you could bow down to them. (At

least they had some truth in advertising back then.) Today these idols have gotten trickier; they’ve gone incognito. But nonetheless they will rob us of our best; they will lead us down the wrong path; they will take more and more of us while delivering less and less to us. They’ve gotten trickier, but we all still bow down.

This morning let’s look at these false gods, these idols. Today, this first Sunday in Lent, is the first of a series of four sermons that I’ll be preaching to help us be ready to worship the risen Lord by Easter Sunday, the one who does not fail us. I’ll preach these next Sundays, when it’s my turn, on success, on money, on relationships—which is a big clue. These false gods are all good things, aren’t they? (I’m indebted to Timothy Keller who has written a very helpful book, *Counterfeit Gods*, and some of the thoughts of John Ortberg for this series) but today let’s focus on these idols in the Bible. Why are they such a big deal and why is God so against them? What’s the real problem with idolatry? What price do we keep paying? How do we recognize them if they’re not as out in the open as they used to be?

I You probably know God has always told His people to be careful about idols. “Stay away!” The first commandment, which we just heard, is “I am the Lord thy God who brought you up out of the land of bondage: have no gods before Me.” And here comes a confidence builder to make up for that first one from the American Religious Data Archive. Who is it who said, “This is the first and greatest commandment: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all your heart and soul and mind and strength’”? (If you guessed Jesus, you got it.) The Israelites, the ancient covenant people of God, were always in danger of worshipping those false gods, the gods of one territory or other, whether it was Marduk of the Babylonians or Molech of the Canaanites or the Dagon of the Philistines or Baal or others.

Today of course we hear about Moses and Aaron and the gods of the Canaanites, Baal. They’ve had a long history; we’ve had a long history, haven’t we, we covenant people of God. A long history of bowing down to the wrong ones. It’s peculiar in our lesson this morning: Moses has led these very people; they’ve spent all their life in oppressive slavery. Moses, through the power of God not three months before, had led the people into freedom—not one of them can have forgotten that—and

yet they seem to want to forget it. They have all seen Moses go up to the top of Mount Sinai; they have all seen thunder and lightning as he has conversed with God, as he has spent his time up there. They can't possibly have forgotten that and yet here they are making this idol, this golden calf. What great efficiency: they have managed to break the first two commandments with one move. They've shattered the world record for least amount of time elapsed by an ungrateful nation to rebel against their god. Moses, as we heard, is not happy when he comes down. "Aaron, what's going on down here? What's that, uh, golden thing you're holding in your hand that the people all seem to be worshipping, Aaron?" "Oh Moses, take it easy, don't jump to conclusions. People got a little worried when you were running behind schedule. We decided to, you know, take up a collection of some gold things. I threw it into the fire and golly gee whiz, guess what came out? This golden calf!" Even back then, people were not proud of their idolatry, and even back then it tended to be impatience and insecurity that people were pushed to, that people turned to when they betrayed their true Source of security. It's one characteristic of our false gods even today. We turn to idols because we want to negotiate, we want to think that we're in charge. I mean, what can a golden statue you can hold in your hand really demand of you, anyway? Back then, they tended to bow down to these statues, but even Ezekiel in the Hebrew Scriptures recognized these people had set up idols in their own hearts and that these idols inside our hearts are the most dangerous, insidious kind. This is not a recent insight.

Idols start out as good things: things like power, success, pleasure, sex, security, family, accomplishments. One becomes an idol when I take it, place it in the primary spot within me, reserved for God, and act as if it is God. An idol is anything designed by God to be secondary or even perhaps insignificant which I choose to make ultimate in my life.

II We all tend to do this. John Calvin wrote, "The human heart is an idol factory." We are working around the clock, churning out false gods depending on what it is we need at one or another time or station in our life."

It's trickier for us these days. As long as things don't go horribly wrong it can be hard for us to tell we have an idol problem. Part of any idolatry is denial. "Who, me? An idol problem?" We've heard that saying, "It's hard to notice the dragon that swallowed you whole." "The fish never notices the water it's swimming in." In prosperous times, when we're secure, our idols are likely to remain incognito. It's when adversity comes; it's when we lose them, when things go wrong, that our idols are finally revealed. (We can tell they're our idols when they lead to

despair, not merely to loss or sadness. Sadness over loss is natural; it's when our setbacks make us despondent, despairing, that we have an idol problem. As long as we know God is in control, we may be sad or even scared. But we despair when we believe there's nothing higher to turn to, nothing left.) The question probably isn't whether we worship false gods; it's which false gods we choose. Which do I choose, to overshadow the living God? So I'm going to share with you my list of candidates for my favorite idol. You get to vote; you get to decide which ones you wrestle with, you agonize with. Then we'll count off by threes and you can discuss this in your small groups... (or not.) One attractive false idol is money. For North Americans, enough said. And yet we know hundreds of millions of people around the world live on almost nothing day to day and still live lives of joy and fulfillment. How would we do plopped down in one of their villages surviving on what they have?

Success. Many people make costly sacrifices to become a "success," no? How about relationships? Even family relationships, loving relationships, can become idolatrous and lead to clinging and over-protectiveness and uneasiness and just get everything getting all fouled up. Timothy Keller refers to a book called *If You Can't Live Without Me, Why Aren't You Dead Yet?* (Sounds like a country western song, doesn't it? If you can't live without me, how come you ain't dead by now?) Today we have different psychological names for relationship ills, like "codependency." When we get too invested in fixing the lives of others or making it easy for others who chose not to get fixed, it's another word for idolatry. Different word, but it leads to the same messed-up life when we allow anything lesser to occupy the primary priority where God needs to be. Being smart or being recognized as intelligent.

Does anybody else crave this kind of recognition? Last year, I was visiting colleges with my daughter. At one, there was a fabulous guest preacher, a visiting professor, who had just written a book published by a major publisher. I attended the Worship Service in which he had preached powerfully to about 500 people. He was a Ph.D. He offered a seminar afterward, which I attended, and it turned out it was a pretty small group and I can't begin to tell you how hard it was for me to keep my mouth shut and refrain from sharing my brilliant insights with the students around the table. It was very hard work for me to avoid instructing all of them, including him, as to how they really ought to be understanding his topic. (It's so easy for me to play Mr. Know-it-all. I'd probably still try to play the sports champion card thirty years later if I thought it would fool anyone.)

Physical attractiveness is another false idol, isn't it? What

physical pain, what disfigurement people go through for this one. The hair, the teeth the nails, the figure, the diet. It's still idolatry when it threatens to become anyone's primary sense of identity. Pleasure. Even babies recognize pleasure, no? Some adults still organize their lives around self-gratification, out of the feeling of pleasure. Often it comes from the desire to escape the pain of life, the painful feelings and fears. These can become so powerful that one's whole life project can become trying to avoid the pain. We call this addiction—another word for a kind of idolatry. How about church? And just when some of us thought we were hoping to get credit for this kind of thing...but when my motives are to get credit all my religious efforts don't count. Jesus didn't think so highly of most of the Pharisees, did He? (They were the ones in His day known for knowing the Bible, knowing the rules and discussing and keeping the rules.) Let's not forget work, career. Workaholism is the socially accepted addiction but it's still destructive. It will still demand more and more of you and return less and less to you. These are some of the most likely idols. You probably have a few of your own, but here are another few ways which may help you become more clear which are your favorites. What do you think about the most? What preoccupies you? What do you daydream about? Which do you fear losing the most? Which causes you to think your life might be over if you were to lose it? Is there anything that causes you not dreams, but nightmares? What is it that gives you your sense of identity?—"I'm somebody because I have this, because I own that, because I'm known for this quality." (Most of you probably have an idea how many pairs of tennis shoes and how many frequent flier miles I wore through—but what opportunities for great relationships, for graduate school, and other opportunities I gladly gave up to feel like, to be known as a "somebody" because I had a really good backhand.) And what causes you to lose your temper? To get irrationally angry? What is it that causes you to lose your sense of humor? You can chuckle about just almost anything, but this one thing is never funny.

III So we have a sense by now of how our false gods can claim us and how subtle they can be. I hope you have a sense of which ones you may be bowing down to in which temples of worship, whether you know it or not. But let's look now at the price we pay to worship these false gods. I have three more things for you: three prices we pay for idol worship. One price we pay is that worshipping false idols will prevent us from knowing and pursuing God's assignment for our life. We know God has a life-assignment, and then smaller assignments for each one of us. God has created you for a specific purpose.

God cares about how you live, how you get there, in what shape you arrive. God has plans for you; "plans for good, and not for evil."

To pursue idols is how people try to manipulate spiritual power to get what they want. People even in ancient times had concepts that we've always had. (Because we're created in the image of God, we are imbued with concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, justice and fairness.) People have always worshiped gods and goddesses. It's just that in paganism ethical concepts had nothing to do with the gods and goddesses. The gods and goddesses were no better, no worse than humans: just as vengeful, just as petty, just as lusty as we are, except they could break the rules and get away with it. They were more powerful than humans were and so people inevitably tried to use gods and goddesses to get what they wanted.

Until, that is, in this one little corner of the world, this one little tribe came up with an idea unique in human history. There's not one god for each tribe, each land, each city-state. There's one Creator of all the world. He's not merely local like Marduk or Baal. He stands unequivocally, always, on the side of good, with justice, with love—regardless which tribe is in the right or in the wrong. This God is not angry, petty, lustful, driven. This God loves each one. No idol ever says or asks, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God?" [Micah 6:8] We call this concept ethical monotheism.

This one little tiny tribe has changed the world for good. (No idol will call forth a Moses to deliver any Ten Commandments. Idols exist so we can avoid commandments, so we can keep our wiggle room!) No idol can ever tell me for what I was created; can ever help me get there. An idol will take my best efforts, and keep giving me less and less in return. None of what I give up for it will lead to what God wants for me, what God has created me for. None of what an idol can give will help you grow into faithfulness, grow into the image of Christ, grow into being the woman or man you were created to be. (If anything, my idols provide distractions and excuses for my failure to step up and grow in Christ.)

Number two, idols will ruin you. Most idols around Corona del Mar in 2010 in one form or other tell us "thou shalt achieve." There's not one of us who doesn't know this demand. Achieve, be better, rise higher; be perfect at school, at work, in high school, in kindergarten. Be perfect at daycare. Have a perfectly attractive home, suitable to an architectural journal with perfect light and color to reflect your perfectly sophisticated taste. Have perfect children who do perfectly at school and at soccer and t-ball. They must get into perfect schools, embark on

perfect careers accompanied by their perfect spouses, keep a perfect career while being the perfect parent, keeping it all in perfect balance through perfect scheduling and time-management skills. Have a perfect wardrobe, clothing a perfect physique or figure, do perfect community service and volunteer activities and perfect church involvement in the perfect-looking little cute white church among perfect believers with you perfect pastors (oops—that was my idolatry.) If anyone, including God, thinks I'm not perfect I'll just keep trying harder until they're sure.

This lifestyle is going to ruin every one of us when we're driven by false gods. They keep demanding more and more, returning less and less—and no idol ever promised, "Come to Me when you are beaten down, when you are heavenly laden, when you're bent beneath your burden because I will give you rest. I will give you peace." Jesus promised this rest for the religious Jews, among others—those who had worshipped the false gods of religious achievement, who had tried to follow the letter of the law in every particular, all day long every day: "you can't do this, you must do that." Jesus told them, "Come to Me. You don't have to achieve any more. You can't impress God even by perfect obedience; God already loves you anyway. Come to Me; just put down your heavy load. Come and find rest, and My holy peace."

I've already alluded to this third cost that the false gods demand of us. They keep demanding; they will ruin us, yet they never deliver; theirs are always false promises and they make us crazy. They change who we are. Not so long ago we would have recognized this as a cruel joke which was circulating on the internet about one of the football games at Mile High stadium just a couple months ago in Denver. The Bronco football game was a sellout. One fan saw an open seat in the midst of occupied seats; so he went down and inquired of the Bronco fan who was seated next to the empty seat. He asked the guy if he knew whose seat it was; they all kind of knew each other in that section. The guy said, "Yeah, that used to be my wife's seat. We've never missed watching a game in thirty years, but now I've lost her." The fan offered his sympathy, then he observed it was a shame the man couldn't find some friend or relative he could give the ticket to so they could both now enjoy the game together. He said, "I tried, but they're all at her funeral."

This sounds like a cruel joke, until we read what the false gods do—what did they do with Tiger Woods or Mark McGwire, or Andre Agassi, or Governor Sanford, or Governor Spitzer or President Clinton or Britney Spears or Mel Gibson or your neighbor who's dying from lung cancer and will not quit smoking or you or me. Idols don't care. It's not true that idols have no power—they have the

power to make us crazy. They will lure us away; they will steal from us what we most crave—fame or security or sobriety or beauty or respect or power or love. They will steal them and leave us empty and if we stay at them long enough they will leave us dead. They don't care.

There's one who cares. No idol ever died on a cross. No idol loves us. No idol can give you what you truly need: forgiveness, mercy, grace, rest, love, purpose, peace. There is one God worthy of your ultimate allegiance. There's one Father who promises to love you however imperfect you may be. There's one Son, Jesus, who brings not death, but life. There's one Spirit who promises to be with you in your daily struggles to dump your false gods.

Exodus 32:1-6; 21-24

32:1 When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

2 Aaron said to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

3 So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

4 He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

5 When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, "Tomorrow shall be a festival to the LORD..."

6 They rose early the next day, and offered burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.

21 Moses said to Aaron, "What did this people do to you that you have brought so great a sin upon them?"

22 And Aaron said, "Do not let the anger of my lord burn hot; you know the people, that they are bent on evil.

23 They said to me, 'Make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'

24 So I said to them, 'Whoever has gold, take it off'; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!"