

Idolatry

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for today. We thank You that You are sufficient for every need and challenge that we face, and far more than sufficient. You have promised that in our weakness You will be made strong and we thank You for that promise. Write it on our hearts, we pray. And Father, we pray that You will be with us now and help us to think clearly and faithfully in accord with Your Word. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

We were talking about deism in the last session. I just want to finish that section off very quickly before we turn to our study of idolatry. At the end of last session we were talking about danger signals in evangelicalism at the present time and the steady drift toward deism in some parts of the church. I want to finish that discussion of deism by first pointing out some areas for communication, some bridges for the deist, and then say a little bit about some areas to challenge the deist.

First, there are some bridges, or areas of connection, and I am just going to mention a couple of things here. Obviously the acknowledgement that there is a God is the most basic bridge, just as it was for Paul when he was speaking to the people in Athens. Second, because many of those who are deists regard themselves as Christians, at least in some way, they have some respect for the Bible. Although they will not regard it as the infallible Word of God, they have some respect for it, and they have some respect for the person of Christ even though they have very vague ideas about who He truly was. They will also have some respect for at least the second half of the Ten Commandments. So those are some areas of bridging. In fact, if you look back at the basic beliefs of deism that we went over at the very end of the session last time, each one of those gives you some kind of bridging point where you can start to communicate. But these three or four things are some of the most important where you are really going to more readily gain a hearing.

In terms of the problems, the first problem or area of challenge you can raise is the whole issue of comparative religions. As I pointed out to you, the statistics today are something like 70%-80% of the members of almost all mainline churches believe that all religions lead to God and that religions are all basically the same. This was, of course, the view of Lord Herbert as well, going right back to the origins of deism. But it simply is not true that all religions are the same. That is a very superficial understanding of the great religions of the world. You will see that the religions, the more carefully you look at them and treat them at least with some respect, have very different views of God.

Christianity declares that God is personal as well as infinite. Most of those who belong to Eastern religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, if they believe in God at all, think of Him not as "Him" at all but as impersonal. They tend to be pantheistic. There are some Hindus who are monotheistic. Hare Krishnas, for example, are monotheistic. But there is a radical distinction between the personal, triune God of Christianity and the impersonal, "God is in everything" of the great majority of Hindus and many Buddhists. Some Buddhists are atheists especially if you look into Zen. Some religions teach that God is absolutely one, like Islam and Judaism. Many ordinary Hindus and Buddhists think of there being many, many gods. They are like the pagans of Lystra in the first century. And Christianity, of course, teaches that God is a Trinity—three persons in one Godhead.

There are radical differences among religions about the character and attributes of God. Christianity teaches that God has a very particular character—one of love, justice, mercy, and kindness. In Islam, the

love of God and the mercy of God tend to recede because God is absolutely one, so it is difficult for the Muslim to hold onto God being truly personal and truly loving. In Hinduism in particular, God has no particular distinctives or character. God is light and darkness, good and evil, kindness and cruelty. Kali, the Hindu god of destruction and death, is always presented with skulls around her neck. God is the reconciliation of all opposites in any pantheistic religion. He has no particular character.

Religions have different views of the sovereignty of God. God is immanent only, with us and within us, and so on. There are many different views of God in different religions. These different views of God lead to very different views about what our dilemma is as human persons and who we are as human persons. Biblical Christianity teaches that our fundamental problem is a moral problem—that we are rebels against God. But in all New Age religion, our problem is a problem of perception, not of sin. For the New Age, our problem is that we have forgotten that we are God. That is our problem. It is not sin at all.

Of course these different views of the human dilemma lead to different views of salvation. Religions have radically different views of the meaning of history. At the most basic points, the great religions of the world are very different from each other. It is only at a very superficial level that they can be considered similar. When we do find similarities with Christianity, it is usually because the religion is a Christian heresy, like Islam or the Jehovah's Witness religion or Mormonism. They are departures, historically, from Christianity. They are heresies that have gone in particular directions.

That is the first area of challenge. The second is the source of human knowledge. Where do we find knowledge, and how do we discern truth? Again, religions have very different views here. Christianity declares that God has spoken to us. For the deist, the ultimate source of the knowledge of the universe and of God is human reason and the moral conscience. This eventually leads to skepticism and uncertainty. So this is a second area where one can challenge the deist. What is the source of truth and knowledge? The source the deist points to is the one in the end that leads to complete ignorance. There are two fundamental problems with claiming that human beings are the source of truth and knowledge. The first is that we are finite, and therefore we can never be sure whether we know something clearly and perfectly. It is the problem that postmodernism wrestles with. The second problem is that we are sinners. All of our knowledge is clouded by the sins of pride and many, many other sins. You know this very well if you think of your response to other people or your response to God. Your knowledge is clouded by your sin in all sorts of ways.

The third area of challenge is simply the question of who God is for the deist. Basically the deist is making a god who is suitable for the person. They are deciding who God is. One only has to give this a little thought to recognize how absurd this is. We have no freedom to decide who God is. He either is or He is not, and He is who He is. That, of course, is how He reveals Himself to us. He revealed Himself to Moses by saying, "I am who I am." God is who He is, not what anybody wants Him to be. It is one of the follies when you see these surveys of famous people asking what they think about God—who their god is. Usually their god is simply a blown up image of themselves. It is actually what you get. Karl Barth put it that way himself. He was talking about liberal theologians in the nineteenth century and he said they looked down 1900 years of history, down to the bottom of the well to the face of Christ, and they saw their own faces staring up from the bottom. That is a perfectly appropriate description of the deist as well. The deist's view of God is simply a kind of blown-up image of who they would really like to be themselves. But basically, the deist makes God less threatening, more comfortable, and less demanding. He asks less of us, and that is easier for us to cope with.

A fourth challenge is the question of who we are. And what a human person is. The deist, in denying Christianity, loses the foundation for affirming true human dignity. Christianity gives us a wonderful account of our humanity, both in our glory as the image of God and in our shame as rebels and sinners.

A fifth area of challenge is the question of what good conduct is. In the end the deist, in rejecting biblical Christianity, has undermined the possibility of being able to define what is good and what is evil. This, of course, is one of the most fundamental problems of the culture in which we live. The deist finds himself in the same dilemma of the loss of moral certainty.

A final problem is that the deist has no way whatsoever of dealing with sin and making himself or herself acceptable to God. God is the source of our distinction between good and evil, and He is perfect. We are left with the problem of how can we make ourselves acceptable to Him.

I want to turn now to the issue of idolatry. I have called idolatry “the home of the unbelieving heart.” Deism leads naturally to practical idolatry. One way to put it very simply would be that the god of deism is a far god, and we all need something near to worship. Dick Keyes from L’Abri in Massachusetts uses this expression. Because the god of deism is not anybody you can really worship, then the human will and heart will find something else to worship. Deism leads naturally to idolatry. The idolatry of some part of creation is one of the most fundamental problems of the culture in which we live and one of the primary areas where you can challenge people.

I want to do a very rapid study of idolatry. Let us take a brief look at Romans chapters 1 and 2 where Paul addressed the issue of idolatry. I am going to divide this study of idolatry into three sections. I will go through the first section very fast because you can refer to and read through Romans 1:18-2:16 yourself. One of the interesting things about the letter to the Romans is that it is quite different from any of the other New Testament epistles because it is setting out some of the most basic doctrines in detail. Paul is laying out for the Romans the Gospel that he proclaims, and the reason that he is doing this is because he has not been there. In all the other churches to which he writes in the New Testament, he has been there himself and laid the foundation for them by proclaiming the Gospel in its fullness. So the other letters are dealing with particular questions and troubles that the church is wrestling with. When Paul writes to the Romans, that is not really the situation. He is writing to a church. There are particular situations he deals with, of course, that he has heard about by a letter and from people like Priscilla and Aquila, who have been there and who he knows well. But because Paul has never been there, he is laying an apostolic foundation and proclaiming the Gospel that he believes. That is how he expresses it in Romans 1:16-17, that he is not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. It is the power of God to salvation for the Jew first and also for the Gentile. Then from verse 18 onward, he sets out the Gospel that he proclaims.

What is very interesting to us, and it mirrors precisely what we see in Paul’s address to the Athenians, is that he starts Romans by dealing with the issue of idolatry and rebellion against God and worshipping other things. That is where he begins this section of Romans, which is where he started with his address to the Athenians. And that is where he challenged them. Here he is writing to believers in the church and there are many Gentiles in the congregation. (There are at least half a dozen congregations in the church at Rome and you see this at the end of the letter, in chapter 16, where Paul lists perhaps half a dozen house churches. Paul is writing this to both Jewish and Gentile believers and so he begins with the issue of idolatry. He does not begin with the person of Christ but with the knowledge of God and the issue of idolatry. That is, of course, where we are often going to begin today in our culture because almost everyone around us is an idolater in some form or another; they are suppressing the knowledge of God. That is where Paul begins. He makes five basic points in this section on idolatry.

First, God has revealed Himself to the whole of the human race. He has made Himself known to everyone. He says that very plainly at the beginning of that section from verse 18 onward. Paul is basically answering the charge that because you cannot see God, we really do not know anything about Him. Paul says God has made Himself clearly known, and this is true for every human being. They are all faced with this clear declaration of the knowledge of God. He tells us three things that can be known about God from His revelation of Himself in the created universe. His eternal power as the Creator can be known. It is evident to everyone that this is a created universe. It is remarkable that in America, despite the teaching of evolution in the schools for generations, that the overwhelming majority of Americans still believe in some form of creation. Those beliefs may be mixed with evolutionary ideas, but in the end they believe it had to be started by God no matter what they were taught and no matter what they hear on the radio, read in the paper, or see on the television over and over again. Second, God's divine nature can be known—that there is a supreme being who has existence in Himself. And third, God's moral nature can be known. Paul says they know God's righteous decree.

Everyone understands that this is a moral universe, that there is a distinction between good and evil. People may be moral relativists or say they are, but in the end everyone makes clear distinctions between right and wrong at some point in their lives. I point here to the illustration that Francis Schaeffer used to use. It is an excellent illustration he used talking about Romans 1. Paul is making the point that all of us, every human being you will ever meet, no matter how much they say they are a moral relativist, will constantly be making moral judgments of other people. Schaeffer uses the image of every individual having a tape recorder around his or her neck. Just imagine yourself with a little tape recorder around your neck and the only thing that tape recorder recorded was the moral criticisms you made of other people. Just think of all those criticisms that people make, and the criticisms of people around us, of members of our family, of neighbors, even of friends, of fellow students, of your faculty, and anybody you like to criticize. Just think of that tape recorder automatically recording every criticism you ever make of another person in your mind or verbally. Schaeffer makes the point that all God is going to have to do on judgment day is to press the playback button, and you are going to be condemned out of your own mouth. This underlines the point that we all make distinctions, clear distinctions, between good and evil. We are accountable to God. So that is Paul's first major point here—the clear knowledge of God that is present for every human being. You are never going to meet somebody who is not constantly confronted with God's revelation of Himself. That is the point Paul makes to the pagans at Lystra and in Athens.

Second, people have no excuse for not worshipping God. God's revelation of Himself is absolutely clear. Our human problem is not ignorance. Just think of the way Psalm 19 expresses it. The clarity of God's revelation of Himself, "Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world." The Psalmist could not possibly put it more strongly. The human problem is not ignorance of the existence of God, of His supreme power or divine nature, or His moral authority. People may say it is, but that is not their problem.

The vast majority of people acknowledge that there is a God no matter how passionately atheism is taught. American society has taught a secular worldview for generations, and yet well over 90% of Americans continue to believe that there is a God, regardless of what they are taught. Even the minority, who are committed atheists, spend their lives fighting against God. It is a fascinating thing. They protest too much. The problem is not ignorance. It is a willful refusal to acknowledge God. Paul expresses it by saying, "They suppress the truth in unrighteousness." They did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. They refused to have God in their knowledge. It is as if every human being has the

knowledge of God constantly arising in their hearts, and they are doing all they can to press it down and try to avoid that revelation. They also refuse to give thanks to God and worship Him. Paul says to the people in Lystra, “Every day God gives you your food and crops in season, the sun and the rain. He fills your hearts with joy. You constantly have God’s good gifts in your hands but you refuse to give thanks or to worship him.”

The third point that Paul makes regarding idolatry is that in every culture people claim wisdom for their own ideas. All cultures claim wisdom for their own ideas about the universe, about what is true, and about God. They develop their own wisdom, their own worldview, but Paul says these ideas are actually empty and vain. They claim to be wise, but they are really folly. They are simply an invention of the human mind. People’s views of God are simply an invention of the human mind. That is all they are. “So,” he said, “they became fools. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie.” He talks about people having a depraved mind. It is not just our wills or our emotional make-up that are depraved, but it is also our minds—that is the human condition. People think evil things. Paul says elsewhere that they are alienated from God in their understanding. Their hearts are also foolish. Their hearts become darkened with folly and this is because of the kind of devotion they indulge in rather than the worship of God.

Paul’s fourth point is the folly of idolatry. This folly of both heart and mind is demonstrated by idolatry. And because people are innately religious, they all worship something. Paul talks about the worship of oneself as a human being, the worship of humanity, and the worship of other parts of creation. We may worship actual idols, images of some part of creation like the statue of Diana in Ephesus or of Athena or whoever in the city of Athens. We may worship some part of creation directly, like the sun or the moon or material possessions or sexuality. Or we may worship humanity in some form. I may worship myself as an individual. I may worship some hero such as a sports figure, film star, musician, or singer. Some may worship the nation. There are lots of people who have fundamentally a civic religion and whose idol is their nation. So, they are exchanging the glory of the immortal God for something that is worthless in comparison.

Finally, Paul goes on to say that the folly of idolatry is further demonstrated by the moral consequences of not worshipping God. Paul, in the second half of Romans 1, talks about those moral consequences. Whenever people turn away from God, Paul says that God gives them over to a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done. That is the practical reality—part of God’s present revelation or God’s wrath. People do not just face the future revelation of God’s judgment. They have to live daily with the constant reality of God’s judgment revealed in the present. Paul says God’s wrath is being revealed now against all godlessness of people. Whenever they turn away from God, God will give them over to immorality. That is the consequence. So he talked about the present reality of God’s judgment. Paul chooses, first of all, the issue of the breakdown of sexual morality. One of the first indicators of false religion is the breakdown of the family, of chastity and fidelity in marriage. Paul expressed that both in terms of radical sexual promiscuity and also homosexual behavior. Then he went on to say that moral breakdown, revelation of God’s wrath in the present, is also demonstrated by people being given up to every other kind of sin as well. He gives an appalling and shocking list of the kinds of sins that people are involved in.

One final point is that the closer any religion is to the truth, the less moral breakdown there will be because any element of the truth acts as a kind of brake or constraint on human immorality and disobedience. Let us say, for example, you are a Confucian and you have a very strong conviction that there is moral order for life and the universe. That is going to act as a brake or constraint on human sin. Or if you passionately believe that there is one God to whom you are accountable (like an orthodox Jew

or a committed Muslim) then that is going to act as a brake on all kinds of sin. It certainly will not make people righteous, but any element of the truth is going to act as a constraint on sin.

Now those are five of the basic points that Paul makes about the nature of idolatry, and that leads us to our second area of study. I will go through this in a little more detail, though it is going to have to be quick. How does idolatry work? As you think about this issue of idolatry, people have the knowledge of God but they refuse to acknowledge Him. They refuse to worship Him, and they develop their own religion in place of worshipping God. It is that turning away from God that leads inevitably to idolatry because people have to live their life for something. God has set eternity in our hearts. People have a longing to worship something.

Let us think about the nature of idolatry. We can break religious needs down into three basic needs. First, everyone has a need for an explanation of life. They have a need of the mind. Every human person needs to have some account of the world—who they are as human persons and what life is for. Every culture on the face of the earth has such an account. You might say that every culture has a story that explains and gives meaning and order to life. This is true for every culture. It is true for every individual—to some degree. Everyone has a story that tells him or her what life is about.

As Christians who have bowed before God by the work of His Spirit in our hearts and minds, we have come to know that God's Word is the truth. We know that God gives us the true account of reality, the true account of who He is, of who we are, of what our problem is, and what His resolution to that problem is. It also tells us where our history is ultimately going. The creed, any statement of faith, is simply an account, a brief setting out of that story, of what we believe about the nature of the universe, about God, and about ourselves. That is the first fundamental need that all human beings have, a need for an account that makes some sense of the world.

Second, everyone has an emotional need, a need for emotional satisfaction and commitment. That is true for every person you will ever meet. Everyone has the need for rituals. Think of the rituals that every family has at Christmas whether they are believers or not. Everyone has the need to give honor and praise to something and receive the emotional satisfaction that arises from this. Everyone has a need for worship, to see something as the source of joy and emotional satisfaction in their lives. You might say that everybody gives thanks to something. That is the emotional need. For us as Christians, our catechism puts it this way: we have been created to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Our emotional need is truly met by knowing God—by worshipping Him, enjoying Him, finding fulfillment in knowing Him, praising Him, and thanking Him for all the gifts of life.

There is a third fundamental need and that is the need of the will. All human beings you will ever meet have a need for direction for their wills. We all live for something. We all have some purpose around which we order our lives and make our priorities. We live in obedience to some organizing principle. What do I live in obedience to? What controls my moral choices? We all have something. Again, God has created us to acknowledge Him as our Lord, Master, and Judge. He calls us to live in obedience to Him, following His commandments, walking in His ways, and finding fulfillment in our humanity as we do. We are created to live in obedience to God, to walk in our Father's footsteps. That is how the Scripture puts it. This is the way God walks, and that is the way we are made to walk. "We have to walk the walk," is a thoroughly biblical expression.

The Gospel brings all three of these deep needs of the human person together. We might put it simply and say that Christ is the way, the truth, and the life—the rational, the emotional, and the volitional. The mind, the emotions, and the will are all met in the worship of God. We find the deepest possible

satisfaction in that, and that is what we are created for. That is how eternity, which is set in our hearts and minds and wills, is met.

What is happening in our culture today? For most people around us these three are split apart in some way. We may have one idol of the mind and another of the heart and will. Most Americans who say they believe in God are deists. They believe that God is a distant God who certainly does not satisfy the needs of the heart or the will. He is just there to give an explanation—He made it all. They do not think it came about by chance, so they think God is there. The beliefs of deism are basically the same.

One belief is that God is needed to start the world as a Creator, but there is no sense of God as provider or as ruler of creation or the nations. There is no belief in God acting in history. Those things are completely missing in the minds of most of our contemporaries. God is simply the distant God who made the world. The second is that God is unknown. We can have no certain knowledge of Him because He has not spoken to us in any kind of word that is trustworthy. Because God is unknown, we do not really know much about Him. The deist has no creed or formal set of beliefs, and there is going to be no worship of Him or love for Him. You cannot really worship and love an unknown god who is far away. The third belief is that there is no sense of God as judge. People around us do not think of themselves as accountable to God. They may think of some extremely wicked people as being judged but not them. One of the particular challenges in our culture is that people have lost that sense of accountability to God. The fourth belief is that God is needed personally only for moments of crisis. People will cry out to Him when they are in need, and they will blame Him for the troubles in their life. But they have no real expectation that God will intervene in their life or answer their prayers. You have lots of people around you who pray in moments of need, but they do not really expect God to do anything. Sometimes people have superstitious views, like quite a few of my neighbors who bury statues of Mary or Joseph in their garden when they go to try to sell their house. That is a form of prayer, but it is more like superstition than prayer.

The fifth belief is that some attend worship services. A good portion of the population still attends worship services from time to time. Some people will say formal or ritual prayers but their attendance at worship and their prayers are primarily for themselves. They go to a worship service because maybe the music or the form of service gives them a lift. It makes them feel a bit better, but they have no real sense of communication with God. This is one of the things that always surprises people when they meet a real Christian. They hear Christians praying and it really surprises people because they have never heard somebody pray who actually appears to be talking to somebody they know and expecting a response. That is very surprising and interesting for many people. The sixth belief is that they think all religions are the same. And many of them think that real involvement in religion is for people who are psychologically weak. It is for children. Many men will say it is for women. It is for needy people or those who have a religious nature. I often have people say to me, “You are obviously a very religious person.” And I say, “No, I am not at all. I am completely uninterested in religion in that sense. I am interested in truth, but I do not have a particularly religious nature. In fact, that is my problem at the deepest level.” And finally, the seventh belief is that there is no word from God so there are no commandments to live by. The god of Deism is a distant god.

That brings us to the emotional need. Obviously deism creates a cold, formal religion that does not satisfy the need for worship in any full way. Though there are people who go to church and enjoy the ritual, the music, the beauty of liturgical worship, or the intense emotional power of some forms of contemporary worship, they think of it primarily as meeting a need rather than actually worshipping God. But people still have a God-shaped hole in their heart and they are going to meet that in all sorts of different ways. One of the primary ways people try to fill that hole is through New Age religion and

spirituality. The great attraction for the vast millions of people in this country to get involved in New Age religion and spirituality is the promise of emotional and spiritual satisfaction and peace. There is a search for inner peace, for being at rest and at peace with oneself. If you read almost any New Age book, that is what you are going to find that it promises—the promise of emotional and spiritual fulfillment and satisfaction.

For many people, and this is true particularly for women, human relationships (marriage and the family) are the primary means of meeting this emotional need. Although, if someone sees his marriage or his relationship with his children as what is going to give him ultimate satisfaction, he can very easily destroy his marriage or his relationship with his children. The more demanding a person is of ultimate satisfaction in a human relationship, the more people are going to run away. We have lots of this going on around us, and many women will drive their children away by demanding too much of them. Family, marriage, and relationships are beautiful gifts of God, but if we turn them into the basis for our ultimate realization of emotional satisfaction we can start destroying them.

Sexual fulfillment is another way that some people try to meet this emotional need, though there are diminishing sexual returns and wilder experimentation is required to give the same pleasure. And in the end, they will experience dissatisfaction and frustration.

Another area is the arts, and particularly music, that is an emotional idol for many people around us whether it is the music itself or the people who play and sing it.

For many Americans, particularly for males, sports take the place of worship and are the primary means of gaining emotional satisfaction. A lot of people have a sports team, player, or a devotion to sports as their idol. It is not that you should not enjoy sports. Sports are another gift of God. Like Eric Lidell said, “When I run I feel God’s pleasure.” So, they are something to be thankful for, but not to worship.

Finally, there is the need of the will. Some people have idols of the heart; others have idols of the will in place of God. Religion, particularly the cults, appeals to many people who are aimless. Lots of young men in prison become Muslims for this reason, because for the first time in their lives they have something around which they can order their priorities, something to live in obedience to. They have something to which they think they can devote themselves that will bring them fulfillment. It is why so many people get involved in cults, like those who followed David Koresh or Heaven’s Gate. Some of the more extreme New Age groups are appealing to this longing for something to give one’s life to, something to obey. There are lots of aimless people.

A political cause can be another idol. For those on the extreme right or left politically, politics become the idol of the will. This is another temptation for Christians as well.

Work can also be an idol for people. Work is one of the biggest idols of the will for people around us. People’s jobs define them as their primary source of their own sense of meaning and their value to themselves, to their family, and to the world. This may be quite an unconscious idol until somebody loses their job, gets laid off, or retires. You see lots of men in particular of whom this is true. Their life completely falls apart when they no longer have a job because their job was their idol. There are lots of pastors whose job is their idol. You need to be careful of that. What is your primary sense of meaning? Work can easily become an idol. Of course God created work to be a gift to enjoy and to find fulfillment in but not to give our lives over to. The wife of a colleague of mine was talking about one of her own relatives, possibly her brother-in-law. He said he completely destroyed his marriage and family because

of his devotion to his work, and he said this about himself: “I am no longer a human being. I am a human doing.” What do you do? People define themselves by what they do, not by who they are.

Wealth is another idol of the will. Money and possessions are another idol for many people. Many people are living for more money. Shopping even gets defined as a disease in this culture. There are people who become completely addicted to shopping. It controls their wills.

Pleasure and self-fulfillment (living for the satisfaction of myself) are also idols of the will. Obviously there are many people where the emotional need and the need of the will are bound up together and cannot be separated. I am describing them in this way just to help us think about what is actually going on in people’s lives.

Idolatry is empty promises. As we have said, the Christian needs to recognize that he or she is to find ultimate satisfaction in knowing God and knowing the truth and delighting in that truth. I am to find my satisfaction in living in obedience to Him, delighting in that call to obey His commandments, loving Him, and enjoying His mercy and forgiveness. The satisfaction of my heart, will, and mind is all found in the Gospel. He calls us to give ourselves to Him in every way.

I want to ask a question about how idolatry works. What is actually going on in somebody’s life as they become an idolater? Our first question deals with why idolatry is attractive. What are the attractions of idolatry? We know that God has revealed Himself so clearly in creation, in His Word, and supremely in His son, Jesus Christ. So why do people not worship Him? Why do they worship idols instead? Why is it that people worship things that are so clearly foolish to worship? These things clearly are not God. What you need to do is read very carefully Isaiah 40-49 because Isaiah addressed in great detail this issue of idolatry and what is going on when somebody becomes an idolater. In Isaiah 44:19-20, he puts it this way: “No one stops to think, no one has the knowledge or understanding to say, ‘Half of this I used for fuel; I even baked bread over its coals, I roasted meat and I ate. Then I made a detestable thing with the bit of wood that was left and I bowed down to it.’” People do not stop and think about the folly of idolatry. Why not? Why is there so much self-deception in idolatry? What is going on? One of the consequences of the Fall is that we are divided from ourselves. We are all, in a sense, schizophrenic. I use that word very carefully, not to be rude about people who are schizophrenic. But we all are divided. We do not know ourselves. You do not know yourself well at all. Our hearts are deceitful. We do not want to know ourselves. A lack of self-knowledge is one of the consequences of sin. When you read Jesus’ encounters with people, He is constantly pushing people toward a greater self-understanding in order to clear away that deceitfulness of heart and mind.

Part of the answer to this question about the attractiveness of idolatry is the divided loyalty. People want to keep God at a distance. They want to satisfy themselves with vague ideas about God but not allow those ideas to intrude on the devotion of their hearts and wills. So we have divided loyalties. Think of how the apostle warns us against that divided loyalty. That is what all of us wrestle with—trying to worship two masters: God and money, God and work, God and my own personal happiness, or whatever it is. Idolatry is attractive precisely because we choose our own idol. We create it. That is why Isaiah describes in great detail how people fashion idols. He describes the devotion and the care that the craftsman puts into making his idol. That is a helpful insight because it is true of the idols that tempt your heart. Think about the devotion you lavish on the thing your heart derives satisfaction from. Think about a person who is in love with himself, with his own body. This is true of many homosexuals. Narcissism, love of oneself, is one of the fundamental issues in homosexuality, especially in male homosexuality. There are a lot of heterosexuals as well who are in love with themselves, with their own bodies. Think about the vast amount of time someone who is in love with himself spends on looking at

himself in a mirror, washing himself, and clothing himself. Think about the money people spend on clothes and makeup. People can spend an enormous amount of time grooming and admiring themselves. All idolatry is like that because I choose the idol. I feel in control. I am the one who makes the money. I am the one who is doing so well at my job. I am the one who holds the family together. I am the one who has made this beautiful home. I am the devoted sports fan. The sense that I am in control, that I am doing this is the fundamental attractiveness of idolatry.

In contrast, God demands submission to His will. He demands that we bow to Him and acknowledge Him as Lord, creator, sustainer, provider, redeemer, and judge. Becoming a Christian requires humbling oneself. Idolatry leaves us with a sense of power and control and that is its primary attraction—choosing something I feel in control of rather than being controlled by God. That is the fundamental nature of sin—the refusal to bow to God, the demand to be the master or mistress of my own life.

What are the rewards of idolatry? What rewards do idols give? They make lots of promises. Idols promise sexual satisfaction, personal peace, financial freedom, realized ambition, success, or whatever it is. There are some rewards and pleasures because idols are actually God's gifts to us. And because they are His good gifts, things such as sexuality, work, and the family, are of course rewards. There is indeed some satisfaction because these are true gifts of God. But the sense of control is an illusion. Idols demand sacrifices. They ask us to give to them and the demands become more and more insistent as time goes by. Consider the example of work. If I live for work as my idol and find my identity in my work, then my job is constantly going to raise the price that it demands—more time, more energy, and more commitment. This will result in less time for my friends, less time for leisure, less time for my children, and less time for my wife or my husband. The longer one is an idolater, the more the idol raises its demands and the more I give up. The demands increase and touch the worshipper closer and closer to the heart. The worshipper loses control. The idol starts to control us. It gives less satisfaction. It demands more devotion. It starts reducing one's humanity. In fact, one will become like one's idol. Psalm 115 expresses this. It talks about idols being silver and gold made by the hands of man. "They have eyes but they do not see, ears but they do not hear, feet but they do not walk. Those who worship them will become like them." We become like what we worship. Think of statements like this: "Money is written all over him," or "Sex is all she (or he) thinks about." We become shaped by our idol; it diminishes our humanity, and our human relationships are destroyed. One is less able to choose anything. The person becomes controlled by the idol and loses dominion.

Finally, the spiritual reality is that people become absolutely addicted to their idol. They become bound, and only God can deliver them. They become trapped by the thing they worship. Psalm 107 speaks about this, and many other passages of Scripture speak about this as well. I will finish off this last section at the beginning of the next session, and then we will look very briefly at the New Age movement.