

**Worship**  
**Tear Down Every Idol (Part 2)**  
**January 28, 2007**  
*Tom Pennington, Pastor*  
*Countryside Bible Church*

Well as we continue our study this morning of this issue of worship, let me begin with another caveat. Last week, I didn't have much of a voice. This week, I have a little more of a voice, but I still have a few of the symptoms. So, let me apologize beforehand for any coughing fits I may have or anything else like that, that may occur, and again I hope and pray that it will not be a distraction for you, nor for me because the truth which we are looking together is absolutely foundational to our Christian lives and experience.

We'd begun a study of the issue of worship. This is our chief responsibility. We began last week by saying that our entire study together of the issue of worship is built on three foundational principles. You must understand these three principles to understand anything else that we're going to talk about, over the coming weeks.

First of all, we said that the end for which God made the world was His own glory. Do you understand that in eternity past, there was only God? There was no space, there was no time, there was nothing but God. And God decided to create. But nothing in God bound Him, or necessitated that He create; instead, He chose to create this entire universe, and you, and He did so with one distinct purpose in mind, and that was His own glory.

That brings us to the second foundational principle that we looked at, last time together. The chief end of man, therefore, is to glorify God. If God made everything for His own glory, that means He made you for His own glory, and that means your chief responsibility is to glorify God.

That brings us to the third foundational principle, and that is that you were made to worship. If the chief end of man is to glorify God, an individual, an intelligent being like you and I are, made in the image of God, if we're going to glorify God, the chief way we do that is through worship. That means that we were made to worship. Every human being has been hard-wired by God to worship.

Do you understand that? There are no exceptions. You were hard-wired by God to worship. Now, man can deny that reality. He can have nothing to do with organized religion at all. He can even call himself an agnostic, or an atheist, but what he cannot do, what he can never do, is change the reality that he was made to worship. Every day of his life, he will worship. If it's not biblical worship, offered solely to the true God, then it will be what the Bible calls "idolatry". But every human being, today, and tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives in existence here and into eternity, every human being will worship. The question is: what, or whom?

Because of that reality, we can say with absolute certainty that idolatry is as great a problem today, in America, in our city, in the evangelical church at large, and even here in this church, and let me make it more personal: in your heart and in my heart, it's as much a problem as it has ever been. You say why would you begin a series on worship by looking at idolatry? Because it's important that before we study true biblical worship, of the true God, we take some time to see what we will worship, if we refuse to worship God with our whole heart. Before we can worship the true God, the Scripture is clear: before our hearts are prepared to truly worship the true God, we must tear down every idol, and every rival in our allegiance to Him.

We're trying to understand this whole issue of idolatry. Last time, we examined the biblical history of idolatry. And just to summarize that for you, if you weren't here, I strongly encourage you to catch up by listening to that online or getting the CD because it's foundational. We looked at a biblical history of idolatry, and here is the basic lesson we walked away with: most of the passages about idolatry in both the Old and the New Testaments have to do with idolatry's influence, not on pagans, but on the people of God. Idolatry is not something that died in the past and that has no relevance to us. You know, there are so many Christians that assume idolatry remains a certain thing, and so there's an entire segment of Scripture that is irrelevant to them. Let me assure you that nothing about idolatry is irrelevant. It is alive and well. And that's what the biblical history of idolatry told us.

Today, I want us to look at a couple of additional elements about idolatry. Lord willing, next Lord's Day, I want us to look at the modern pantheon of idols. I want us to look at what our idolatry as believers, typically looks like because it's not what you think. And also next week, if the Lord wills, we'll look at a biblical response to idolatry. How do you tear down those idols that are in your own heart?

But today, what I want us to do is: I want us to begin by looking at another element of idolatry.

We've seen the biblical history of idolatry. Let's look secondly at the inherent appeal of idolatry: the inherent appeal of idolatry. Why is idolatry so popular? Why has it spread like a kind of malignant cancer across the face of humanity? Or put it differently, what makes idolatry attractive to the human heart? You need to understand it biblically. Idolatry of all kinds, the most gross kind, falling down before some statue, all the way to what Ezekiel calls "idols of the heart", which you and can be more than guilty of, are more than guilty of, all forms of idolatry ultimately find attractiveness to us because of two things: two inherent appeals.

Number one: self-centered gratification. The first inherent appeal of idolatry is self-centered gratification. What made the pagan religions attractive? It was self-gratification. There was some blatant desire that those pagan religions called out to. When you look at the pagan religions and the most common attractions in pagan worship, like the worship of Baal, you essentially find this "self-gratifying" taking three forms. Self-gratification displaying itself in three different ways.

First of all, violence and brutality. This was an important and attractive part of the worship of Baal, for example. Asherah, whom you meet in the Scripture, we met last week, was not only the goddess of love and fertility; she was also the goddess of war, and brutality, and cruelty. In fact, all of the Canaanite goddesses were especially noted for their cruelty. In one graphic account, and this is graphic, I have to warn you, one of these deities, one of these female deities decides for no good reason, to carry out a general massacre. And in the ancient account, after she fills her temple with men, she bars the gate so no one can escape, after which she begins to brutalize and to kill them. The account records that the blood was so deep that she waded in it, at times even up to her neck. Under her feet, she crushed human heads, and above her flew human hands like locusts, the account says. In her sensuous delight, she decorated herself with human hands and heads. She took joy in the butchery. The document says her liver swelled with laughter, and her heart was full of joy. Afterwards, she washed her hands in human gore before she went on to other occupations.

You see, much of the attraction of the ancient idolatry, and still today the attraction of it, is a delight in the sadistic and the cruel. A second part of idolatry that made it self-gratifying in the ancient world was sexual fulfillment. We looked at this in detail last week. So, I'm not going to spend a lot of time today, but let me just remind you that even in the New Testament, when you come to 1 Corinthians 10:7, Paul, as he warns the Corinthians against idolatry, says: "Do not be idolaters, as some of them [that is, the Old Testament Israelites] were; as it is written, [speaking of the incidence with the golden calf,] "THE PEOPLE SAT DOWN TO EAT AND DRINK, [speaking of

excessive feasting,] AND [then they] STOOD UP TO PLAY.” [that’s a euphemism for the orgy that followed the excessive feasting.]

In ancient pagan idolatry, as well as today, one of the self-gratifying attractions is sexual fulfillment. That’s why there were temple prostitutes, for example, in the worship of Baal. That’s what it promised. It promised violence and cruelty and brutality, and it promised sexual fulfillment.

A third attraction was financial prosperity. A third form of self-gratification was financial prosperity. Turn back to Hosea. We touched on this several times last week, but I’ve never really showed you a passage that documented it. Hosea 2. As Hosea decries the idolatry that had come to be so much a part of Israel, he says in verse 5

“For their mother has played the harlot;”[speaking of her unfaithfulness to God,]  
“She who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, “I will go after my lovers,’ [again, the imagery here is that of idolatry, and idols are pictured as these attractive lovers to whom Israel fled. Now watch why. She said I will go after my lovers] “Who give *me* my bread and my water, My wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.” [Verse 8:] “For she does not know,” [God says,] “that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil, And lavished on her silver and gold, *Which* they used for Baal.”

You see, what happened was, the people of Israel bought into the mindset of the pagans, that at the hands of Baal there was financial prosperity. You see, Baal was the storm god: he brought the rain. If you lived in an agricultural society, your success depended on the rain and on the crops that grew as a result. And so, it made sense to hedge your bets by worshipping Baal in hopes that you would have financial prosperity.

You see what’s going on here? Idolatry always has in its inherent appeal self-gratification. And that gratification often takes these forms: of violence, and brutality, of sexual fulfillment, and financial prosperity. It was true in the ancient world, and folks, it is still true today. If we are not worshipping only the true God, then whatever we worship, we do so because we have convinced ourselves, wrongly, that it is going to bring self-centered gratification. That’s why we fall down and worship our idols. It’s because it promises self-gratification. If those who live to pursue self-centered gratification are idolaters, and they are, then our culture is absolutely overcome with idolatry. Although the gods go by different names in our cultured and

enlightened age, our world is still crowded with idolaters who are out to gratify the same basic appetites as the worshipers of Baal.

Take the enjoyment of violence and brutality, for example. Our society, and you know this: you see it all around you, our society increasingly relishes in that brutality, and that cruelty, and blood. That was a common feature of the ancient polytheistic religions. And today, it's still being worshiped. It's still being sought for self-gratification. Whether it's bootlegged videos of teams beating up the homeless, or whether it's muscle-bound men in pay-per-view fights, who permanently maim each other, or whether it's dark and sadistic movies that glorify the worst of cruelty and random acts of violence, unregenerate man still finds a way to worship his gods.

Many others in our sophisticated world would never set up a wooden idol in their homes, and yet they fall down at the alter of sexuality, just as the Baal worshippers did. But in our day it's not the groves; it's the internet, or in some movie or some magazine. They fall down in front of their computer screen and worship their god. It's no different than the sexual sin that took place in the temples and in the high places of Baal.

And consider the promise of financial prosperity that motivated ancient idolatry. Whether our culture's god goes by the name of "mammon" or "wealth", or as we like to call it, "materialism", it could easily be called the national religion of America. After all, that is the essence of the American dream: what it promises to deliver. So, whether we're talking about the ancient polytheistic religions of the middle east, or the gods of our culture, idolatry in all its forms pursues itself because, or pursues us and we pursue it because of self-centered gratification. That is often the inherent appeal in idolatry.

But if you're sitting there thinking, well good, because I don't think any of those attract me, and therefore you think you're exempt from the temptation to idolatry, you better think again. Because as we will discover next week, you and I are capable of turning any desire, any longing of our hearts, into an idol. But whatever it is, whatever form our god takes, whatever temptations we have toward idolatry, it will always be about self-gratification. That's why man worships something other than God.

The second great appeal of idolatry is: self-rule. Not only is there an inherent appeal to self-gratification, but also to self-rule. You see, once you make a counterfeit for God, here's the payoff: it allows you to continue to remain at the center of your world. You simply choose a god who fits your own likes and desire and lifestyle. It is a designer god. What could be better?

And if you have any interaction with the unbelievers around you, you know people like this, who have created their own designer gods. In a recent issue of *Newsweek*, I read an article about a woman named Sheila. It happens to be my wife's name, but no relationship. And Sheila went on to describe her faith, and she called her faith, at least she was honest about it, she called her faith "Sheilaism". Because she had kind of collected parts she liked from various faiths and made her own. A designer god. What could be better than that? Probably a store in the Galleria, or soon will be, that offers designer gods.

Why? Why do people find themselves attracted to idolatry? It's for self-rule. Listen to David Wells.

Why do people choose a substitute over God Himself? Probably the most important reason is that it obviates, or does away with, accountability to God. We can meet idols on their own terms because they are our own creations. They are safe, predictable, and hear it, most importantly, controllable. They are, in Jeremiah's colorful language, "the scarecrows in a cucumber field". They are portable, and completely under the user's control. [Wells goes on to say,] People who remain in the center of their lives and loyalties need only face themselves.

That's the appeal of idolatry. As another author put it, "Idolaters are the autonomous architects of their own futures." Scripture often makes this point: that the appeal of idolatry is self-rule. In Jeremiah 5, for example, verses 3 - 7, you find the people, because of their idolatry, and what led to their idolatry, was a hard-hearted self-will. They will not be bound by the ordinance of God. They will not give in to what the true God demands of them, and so they go after the false gods who give them exactly what they want. In Jeremiah 17:5, in Jeremiah 17, the first 4 verses the author Jeremiah talks about idols, and in verse 5, he says, cursed are those who trust, who put their trust, or confidence, in man. You know what point he's making? He's saying that those who rely on idols are in reality relying upon self instead of God. Paul puts it a little differently in Romans 1. Remember in Romans 1, Paul says that the person who pursues idolatry has first made a deliberate choice. Even though they knew God, they "chose" not to glorify Him as God, or to give thanks.

So, the two features of idolatry that are most appealing to unregenerate men are "self-centered gratification and self-rule". Now folks, if those who give themselves to self-gratification and self-rule are idolaters, and they are, then we live among a people who are no better than the Canaanites. Because we live in a culture given over to self-gratification and self-rule. And like

ancient Israel, you and I, and like the early Church, you and I must guard our hearts from the idolatry that's all around us. First Corinthians 10:14, "Therefore ... beloved, ... [run] from idolatry."

So, the inherent appeals of idolatry are self-gratification and self-rule. We've seen a brief history of idolatry, the inherent appeals of idolatry. Thirdly, I want us to consider the source of idolatry. Where does it come from? If there is only one true God who created everything, we have to ask ourselves, how is it that the world slid so quickly into polytheism and into idolatry of all kinds? Why is there so few that worship their Creator alone?

Well, there's no direct biblical account of the genesis of human idolatry. But there are several indications of how it came to be so pervasive. Where did false religion come from? Where does our own bend toward idolatry come from? And what are the true sources of idolatry? Well, frankly, Bible gives us extremely clear answers. In fact, it identifies several different springs from which idolatry in all its forms, whether it's idolatry of falling down before a wooden statue or setting up an idol in your heart, something that's more important to God, idolatry in all its forms comes from just a handful of springs. Let's look at them together.

The first source of idolatry is: it is an act of personal rebellion against God. Turn to Romans 1. An act of personal rebellion against God. In Romans 1, you remember we looked at this text last time, in verse 18, we learn that God is angry. His wrath, His "οργης", is the Greek word, God is characterized with unbridled passion against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth. God is angry with those who suppress the truth. What truth? Verse 19, the truth about God: "... that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them." God has made it clear to all humanity who He is and what He's like. No one can ever stand before God and say, "I didn't know." How has He made this evident? Verse 20:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, [namely] His eternal power and divine nature,, [His deity,] have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. [Now notice man's response to that clear revelation of God. Verse 21:] For even though they knew God, they ... [chose not to glorify] Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and" [as a result they] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

Listen, don't you for a moment believe the sociologist who argues that the animistic and polytheistic religions of our world are the way "up". According to Paul, they are the way "down". Those people worship the way they worship, because they have rejected the revelation of God, that He has made evident in their hearts and in the world around them.

You see, idolatry is ultimately an act of personal rebellion against God. That's what Paul is saying. As Os Guinness in his book *No God But God* puts it, "Idols are what we make out of the evidence for God within ourselves and in the world if we do not want to face the face of God Himself in His majesty and holiness." God made us to worship Him. As Augustine said, "God made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him. But because of our sinful hearts and the desire to avoid accountability to God, we, in an act of rebellion, choose to substitute something else for God.

The second source of idolatry is: the powerful influence of the people around us, the powerful influence of the people around us. This is a constant concern of the Scripture. There are a number of texts; we looked at a few last week. Turn to Deuteronomy 7. You'll see this very clearly. In Deuteronomy 7, Moses is warning the new generation of Israelites to be careful, as they enter the land of Canaan. Deuteronomy 7:1:

"When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you..." [and he lists those seven nations that are stronger than they are; verse 2:] and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons." [Why? Verse 4:] "For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; ..." [Verse 5:] "... thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their *sacred* pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God;..."

You know what God is saying? He's saying, you ought to be terrified about the influence that people who worship idols around you could have on you. And this was true of the Old Testament people of God, it was equally true of the New Testament people of God. You remember, this was a concern Paul had for the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 10. He was concerned about the influence that idolatry would have on them. Do you understand that you



ought to be afraid? We live in a pagan, idolatrous land. The fact that they are more subtle than other gods, only makes them more dangerous. And if you don't think that the idols that the people around you worship cannot influence you, if you really conclude that you are untouchable from the influence of the idolaters that are all around you, then you don't understand what the Scriptures teach. You are about to fall.

Think for a moment about the wisest man God said who ever lived. Who was it? Solomon. And what happened to Solomon? Was he impervious to the influence of idolaters around him? Absolutely not. Here is a man devoted to God, but because he brought in, out of a desire to enter into treaties with the surrounding nations, he brought in, these foreign wives from these surrounding nations. They influenced his heart toward idolatry. And Solomon, David's son, ended up building a temple for idols in Israel. He ended up worshipping idols, in addition to the true God. And you and I think we can do better? But him who thinks he stands, take heed, that he doesn't fall.

The third source of idolatry, in addition to an act of personal rebellion and the powerful influence of the people around us, the third source of idolatry is: an expression of our fallenness. There's a glimpse of this in the Old Testament. In Hosea 4:12, the prophet speaks of a spirit of harlotry, which led them astray; that is, a spirit of idolatry that's within the heart that led them astray. It didn't come from the outside. It started on the inside, and led them astray. But what that verse hints at, Paul expresses in the clearest possible terms, in Galatians 5. Turn there with me for a moment. Galatians 5. Right after he lists the fruit of the Spirit, in verse 19, Paul comes to the deeds of the flesh. He says this is how the flesh acts. This is how your unredeemed humanness acts: immorality, impurity, sensuality, all those words have to do with sexual sin of one form or another. But notice the beginning of verse 20: the deeds of the flesh, one of them is idolatry.

Now think about that for a moment. That means, if you retain any of your fallenness, which we all do as believers, we have what the Bible calls our flesh. It's not strictly a reference to the body; it's our fallenness; it has both a physical element and a spiritual element, even though we're made new in Christ, we still retain that flesh. If you have that, one of the deeds of the flesh, one of the ways the flesh acts, is: its desires to set up idols. That means you have a betrayer, you have a traitor, inside your heart, that wants to fall down and worship an idol. It's not necessarily a piece of brick or stone or wood, but something other than God.

Idolatry is as natural to man as breathing it is as much a part of the human condition as outbursts of anger, anything else that's in that list. It's natural; it's a natural expression of our fallenness. And that makes us all the more susceptible to it.

A fourth source of idolatry is the work of demons. You see, false gods don't really exist. Paul said that gods made with hands, in Acts 19:26, gods made with hands are no gods at all. And he really drives this home in 1 Corinthians 8. First Corinthians 8:- 4: he says, "Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but **God**."

Listen, we understand there's no false gods and, they don't exist. So, what really lies behind every false god? According to Moses in Deuteronomy 32:17, demons lie behind every false religion and every false god. Paul makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 10, just over a page, 1 Corinthians 10:19:

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, [an idol is nothing. There's no false god.] ... but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God;"

You see, the bottom line is, Satan is opposed to God. And his mechanism, his method for leading humanity away from the worship of the true God is to manufacture the construction of all kinds of false gods and idols. Behind every false system of religion, there is the energy of demonic force trying to lead men away from the worship of the true God. Whether you're talking about animism, pantheism, or Mormonism, it doesn't matter. In the end, behind that, energizing that system, is the work of Satan himself.

So, if you put together what we've learned so far, you can easily see the power that idolatry has. Its siren song comes from the dark world of demonic forces, from the influence of the culture and the people around us, and even from within: from our own fallen, rebellious hearts. So, listen carefully to this. This is crucial: as surely as you and I are hard-wired to worship, and we are, we are pre-programmed by our own fallenness to worship anything but the true God.

You see, the reason I've taken so much time last week and this, is to show us all, don't miss this, is to show us all, that we are by nature idolaters. Remember, every human being is a worshiper, hard-wired to worship. Ask yourself: how many people in our culture truly worship the true God and Him alone? Not very many. That means everyone else by biblical definition is an idolater who has set up a substitute of some kind for the true God. Everybody is worshipping. They're not worshipping the true God; they are engaged in idolatry of one form or another. That means we live in a culture wholly given over to idolatry, and its influence is powerful, just as it was for ancient Israel. Beware of the powerful influence of the idolatry around us. We've also

discovered that our own fallen hearts cry out for an idol, that it's completely normal for us in our fallen flesh, to want to substitute something for the true God. There is, within each of our hearts, the temptations that always lead to idolatry: the temptation to self-gratification and the temptation to self-rule. Add to that, the reality that there are demonic forces that work in the world to draw people away from the worship of the true God, and in light of all of that, it is absolutely shocking that you are here this morning, and that I am here this morning.

Even though you and I are influenced by idolatry more than we realize, and we'll talk about that next week, still, here's the amazing thing: we are here this morning to worship the true and living God in the person of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because we're brighter? Because we're more intelligent than all those people out there that are worshipping idols? No. The fact that you and I are not completely given over to idolatry today, is solely because of divine grace. There're [sic] so many places we can look at this, but my favorite is 1 Corinthians 6. Turn there for a moment. First Corinthians 6:9. Paul says,

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” [There're going to be some people who don't make it into the kingdom of God. And then he has this terrible list:] “Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.” [By the way, that's not a complete list. That's just a representative list. There are other lists in other places, with other kinds of sins. The bottom line is this: if your life is controlled and dominated by sin, you're not going to make it: because it shows that you have not been truly changed. So why is it that we're in? Why is it that we're here this morning? Notice verse 11:] “Such were some of you;” [Some of you were idolaters.] “but you were washed, [but] you were sanctified, [but] you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Listen, what I want you to see, you know the biblical story of Abraham. How God, by sovereign grace, reached down into Ur of the Chaldeans, and snatched an idolater out of a pagan culture, and made him His own. What I want you see this morning is: the fact that you sit here, worshipping the true God, is because God did the same thing to you. He reached down into our pagan culture and our own tendency to worship something other than God, and He snatched us out. And He made us His own by an act of sovereign grace.

He promised to do this. Remember Ezekiel 36? Ezekiel 36:25, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.”

God Himself has cleansed us from our idols. How? Well, if you’ll remember, in Ezekiel 36, in that verse I just read, it’s part of what the Bible calls “the New Covenant”. It was to accomplish that new covenant, that Jesus died on the cross. You see, when Jesus died on the cross, He died to pay the penalty of our idolatry, so that God could cleanse us from our idols. And He purchased our regeneration in which our souls are cleansed from their idols. God, in an act of regenerating love, listen carefully, God, in an act of regenerating love, based solely on the work of Christ, gives us a new heart; a heart that loves to be a true worshipper of Him. So, it’s appropriate this morning, that we celebrate communion, even as we talk about idolatry. Because in His death, our Lord made it possible for God to forgive and be gracious, even to idolaters like us.

Let’s pray together.

Our Father, we thank You for the blood of Christ. We thank You that He died willingly and voluntarily in the place of sinners who deserved to die, in our place.

Father, I pray that You would help us, even this week, to tear down every idol, to thrust aside every rival, in our allegiance to Jesus Christ, and to serve Him with our whole heart.

We pray for His glory, Amen!