

September

27

NO SUBSTITUTES

Anything that takes the place of God in our lives is an idol.

THE WORD

EXODUS
20:4-6

KEY VERSE

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

ROMANS
1:21-25

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

ENGAGE THE WORD

Some people might think it would be great to read a couple of passages of Scripture and be able to say, “I don’t have to worry about this one!” Both of our passages today are dealing with things that most of us don’t struggle with, right? Think about it! Have

you carved an idol in your workshop this week? How about bowing down to a little carved sculpture? Or what about falling prostrate before an image of a fish or a snake? No, more than likely we are not struggling with these types of overt idol worship. But the kind of idolatry we are dealing with today is much more subtle and infinitely more insidious.

FOREIGN GODS

Exodus 20:4-6

Consider the idea that the Hebrews, at the time of receiving these commandments, had now settled in the Promised Land after wandering the desert for 40 years and making bricks for years in Egypt before that. Now after years of trials and “trail-trodding” they find themselves as farmers, surrounded by neighbors who followed foreign gods in whom they trusted for the fertility of their fields. These foreign gods, if properly appeased, would provide bounteous fruit, or so the Canaanites believed. Imagine how the temptation of the Canaanite religion would have been so very enticing. Imagine how tempting some of these ideas and practices must have been for the Hebrews. The immediate in place of patiently waiting for harvest; the visual and embodied worship of Canaanite fertility rituals replacing the invisible Yahweh. The Israelites were offered an exchange—exchange the glory of the immortal God for images, substitutes, shortcuts; exchange the truth of God for a lie.

The second commandment centers on the right way to worship God. The people were not to make and/or worship idols or false gods. God—the immortal, invisible—alone was to be worshiped.

EXCHANGING GOD’S TRUTH FOR A LIE

Romans 1:21-25

It is one thing to proclaim to know God, it is another to acknowledge His lordship and obediently serve Him. Our human pride puts us at the center, pushing God to the edges or completely out of the picture. When self-love rather than God’s love is at the core of our lives,

Did You Know?

The Greek word *allasso* is translated “exchange” in Romans 1, and implies trading one thing for another. There are cases in the New Testament where, unlike our passage today, this change can be positive (1 Corinthians 15:51; Hebrews 1:12).

we become inward-focused rather than God-focused. Idolatry is placing self in place of God and thereby becoming self-serving rather than serving God.

When we reject God’s truth, and instead replace it with our own truth (which includes the world’s truth), we become like the people Paul is describing. When we abandon God’s truth, our thinking becomes useless and our hearts darken. We think we are wise, but we are fools. We bow down and serve the mortal, rather than God who is immortal.

God does not force us to serve Him. He does not make us surrender to His truth. If we choose to serve ourselves rather than God, He will let us. However, when this happens, we exchange God’s truth for the lies of this world and thereby open ourselves up to suffering the consequences of our sinful actions. God does not smite us down for rejecting Him; however, “the darkened, disabled, and distorted center of human affections, intellect, and volition due to universal rejection of God is a revelation of his wrath.”*

And what about us? What lies do we believe? What exchanges do we make? We may not be bowing to statues or engaging in the kinds of physical debauchery mentioned in Romans 1, but what about trading our integrity for a few more dollars? What about exchanging our honor for the exploitation of a weaker brother or sister? What about exchanging our purity for temporary pleasure? Or exchanging our solidarity with our fellow humans for power? Paul reminds us in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But the good news is that there is hope, for “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith” (Romans 3:24-25).

NO IDOLS

Why does humankind do it? Why do people keep trading down, giving away a kingdom and a King for slavery and a harsh and hateful master? God compels

Think About It

The reality is that people have all kinds of false gods. Idols are all around us, because an idol is anything that displaces God and moves Him from the center of our lives.

us to exchange the lies of the world for His truth, the practices of paupers for the robes of righteousness. He is offering us an eternal kingdom in exchange for a corrupted slave camp.

Idolatry often can be, in short, turning something good into something ultimate. Good things like jobs, success, homes and health, friends, spouses or children, all can become an idol if they ever unseat God as the object of ultimate concern. Anything that becomes more important than God for our happiness, personal value, or identity, are idols. We want more wealth, more power, more pleasure, or more comfort than we feel like we've been given, and we take what we want. This is idolatry. This springs from a life of ungratefulness, as we can see in Romans 1:21, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him." Our lack of thankfulness for what God has provided leads us to excess, and that excess leads to confusion ("their thinking became futile," v. 21) and spiritual slavery ("they worshiped and served created things," v. 25).

God does not want us to worship anything or anyone but Him. Yet, we are all guilty of turning from God's ways to our own. That is, times we have exchanged the truth of God for lies and turned our backs on the living God in order to worship created things. But this need not be the final chapter for us. God works with an eager, earnest, and eternal energy. If we turn from the worship of idols and turn our worship toward God, we will experience His steadfast love and faithfulness. God longs to receive you, refresh you, revive, and revitalize you—all you need to do is turn, or continue turning, toward God.

*William M. Greathouse with George Lyons. *New Beacon Bible Commentary: Romans* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008), 75.

REFLECT

Is there anything currently in your life that might be considered an idol?