

Spiritual Idolatry

By John Wesley

Sermon 78 [text from the 1872 edition, ed. Ted Hildebrandt]

“Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” 1 John 5:21

1. There are two words that occur several times in this Epistle, — *paidia* and *teknia*, both of which our translators render by the same expression, *little children*. But their meaning is very different. The former is very properly rendered *little children*; for it means, *babes in Christ*, those that have lately tasted of his love, and are, as yet, weak and unestablished therein. The latter might with more propriety be rendered, *beloved children*; as it does not denote any more than the affection of the speaker to those whom he had begotten in the Lord.

2. An ancient historian relates, that when the Apostle was so enfeebled by age as not to be able to preach, he was frequently brought into the congregation in his chair, and just uttered, “Beloved children, love one another.” He could not have given a more important advice. And equally important is this which lies before us; equally necessary for every part of the Church of Christ. “Beloved children, keep yourselves from idols.”

3. Indeed there is a close connexion between them: one cannot subsist without the other. As there is no firm foundation for the love of our brethren except the love of God, so there is no possibility of loving God except we keep ourselves from idols. But what are the idols of which the Apostle speaks? This is the First thing to be considered. We may then, in the Second place, inquire, how shall we keep ourselves from them.

I. 1. We are, First to consider, What are the idols of which the Apostle speaks? I do not conceive him to mean, at least not principally, the idols that were

worshipped by the heathens. They to whom he was writing, whether they had been Jews or Heathens, were not in much danger from these. There is no probability that the Jews now converted had ever been guilty of worshipping them. As deeply given to this gross idolatry as the Israelites had been for many ages, they were hardly ever entangled therein after their return from the Babylonian captivity. From that period the whole body of Jews had shown a constant, deep abhorrence of it. And the Heathens, after they had once turned to the living God, had their former idols in the utmost detestation. They abhorred to touch the unclean thing; yea, they chose to lay down their lives rather than turn to the worship of those gods whom they now knew to be devils.

2. Neither can we reasonably suppose, that he speaks of those idols that are now worshipped in the Church of Rome; whether angels, or the souls of departed saints, or images of gold, silver, wood or stone. None of these idols were known in the Christian Church till some centuries after the time of the Apostles. Once, indeed, St. John himself fell down to worship before the face of an angel that spoke to him; probably mistaking him, from his glorious appearance, for the Great Angel of the Covenant; but the strong reproof of the angel, which immediately followed, secured the Christians from imitating that bad example: ““See you do it not. As glorious as I appear, I am not your Master. ‘I am your fellow-servant, and of your brethren the Prophets: Worship God’” (Rev. 22:9)

3. Setting then pagan and Romish idols aside, what are those of which we are here warned by the Apostle? The preceding words show us the meaning of these. ““This is the true God,” — the end of all the souls he has made, the centre of all created spirits; — “and eternal life,” — the only foundation of present as well as eternal happiness. To him, therefore, alone, our heart is due. And he cannot, he will not, quit his claim, or consent to its being given to any other. He is continually saying to every child of man, “My son, give me your heart!” And to give our heart to any other is plain idolatry. Accordingly, whatever takes our heart from him, or

shares it with him, is an idol; or, in other words, whatever we seek happiness in independent of God.

4. Take an instance that occurs almost every day: A person who has been long involved in the world, surrounded and fatigued with abundance of business, having at length acquired an easy fortune, disengages himself from all business, and retires into the country, — to be happy. Happy in what? Why, in taking his ease. For he intends now,

Somno et inertibus horis

Ducere sollicitae jucunda obliviae vitae:

To sleep, and pass away,

In gentle inactivity the day!

Happy in eating and drinking whatever his heart desires: perhaps more elegant fare than that of the old Roman, who feasted his imagination before the treat was served up; who, before he left the town, consoled himself with the thought of “fat bacon and cabbage too!”

Uncta satis pingui ponentur oluscula lardo!

Happy, — in altering, enlarging, rebuilding, or at least decorating, the old mansion-house he has purchased; and likewise in improving everything about it; the stables, out-houses, grounds. But, mean time, where does God come in? No where at all. He did not think about him. He no more thought of the King of heaven, than of the King of France. God is not in his plan. The knowledge and love of God are entirely out of the question. Therefore, this whole scheme of happiness in retirement is idolatry, from beginning to end.

5. If we descend to particulars, the first species of this idolatry is what St. John terms, *the desire of the flesh*. We are apt to take this in too narrow a meaning, as if it related to one of the senses only. Not so! This expression equally refers to all the outward senses. It means, the seeking happiness in the gratification of any or all of the external senses; although more particularly of the three lower senses, — tasting, smelling, and feeling. It means, the seeking happiness herein, if not in a

gross, indelicate manner, by open intemperance, by gluttony or drunkenness, or shameless debauchery; yet, in a regular kind of epicurism; in a genteel sensuality; in such an elegant course of self-indulgence as does not disorder either the head or the stomach; as does not at all impair our health, or blemish our reputation.

6. But we must not imagine this species of idolatry is confined to the rich and great. In this also, “the toe of the peasant” (as our poet speaks) “treads upon the heel of the courtier.” Thousands in low as well as in high life sacrifice to this idol; seeking their happiness (though in a more humble manner) in gratifying their outward senses. It is true, their meat, their drink, and the objects that gratify their other senses, are of a coarser kind. But still they make up all the happiness they either have or seek, and usurp the hearts which are due to God.

7. The second species of idolatry mentioned by the Apostle is, *the desire of the eye*: That is, the seeking happiness in gratifying the imagination; (chiefly by means of the eyes;) that internal sense, which is as natural to men as either sight or hearing. This is gratified by such objects as are either grand, or beautiful, or uncommon. But as to grand objects, it seems they do not please any longer than they are new. Were we to survey the Pyramids of Egypt daily for a year, what pleasure would they then give? Nay, what pleasure does a far grander object than these, —

The ocean rolling on the shelly shore,
 give to one who has been long accustomed to it? Yea, what pleasure do we generally receive from the grandest object in the universe, —

Yon ample, azure sky,
 Terribly large, and wonderfully bright,
 With stars unnumberd, and unmeasured light?

8. Beautiful objects are the next general source of the pleasures of the imagination: The works of nature in particular. So persons in all ages have been delighted

With sylvan scenes, and hill and dale,
And liquid lapse of murmuring streams.

others are pleased with adding art to nature; as in gardens, with their various ornaments: others with mere works of art; as buildings, and representations of nature, whether in statues or paintings. Many likewise find pleasure in beautiful apparel, or furniture of various kinds. But novelty must be added to beauty, as well as grandeur, or it soon palls upon the sense.

9. Are we to refer to the head of beauty, the pleasure which many take in a favourite animal? Suppose a sparrow, a parrot, a cat, a lap-dog? Sometimes it may be owing to this. At other times, none but the person pleased can find any beauty at all in the favourite. Nay, perchance it is, in the eyes of all other persons, superlatively ugly. In this case, the pleasure seems to arise from mere whim or caprice; that is, madness.

10. Must we not refer to the head of novelty, chiefly, the pleasure found in most diversions and amusements; which were we to repeat them daily but a few months would be utterly flat and insipid? To the same head we may refer the pleasure that is taken in collecting curiosities; whether they are natural or artificial, whether old or new. This sweetens the labour of the virtuoso, and makes all his labour light.

11. But it is not chiefly to novelty that we are to impute the pleasure we receive from music. Certainly this has an intrinsic beauty, as well as frequently an intrinsic grandeur. This is a beauty and grandeur of a peculiar kind, not easy to be expressed; nearly related to the sublime and the beautiful in poetry, which give an exquisite pleasure. And yet it may be allowed, that novelty heightens the pleasure which arises from any of these sources.

12. From the study of languages, from criticism, and from history, we receive a pleasure of a mixed nature. In all these, there is always something new; frequently something beautiful or sublime. And history not only gratifies the imagination in all these respects, but likewise pleases us by touching our passions;

our love, desire, joy, and pity. The last of these gives us a strong pleasure, though strangely mixed with a kind of pain. So that one need not wonder at the exclamation of a fine poet, —

What is all mirth but turbulence unholy,
When to the charms compared of heavenly melancholy?

13. The love of novelty is immeasurably gratified by experimental philosophy; and, indeed, by every branch of natural philosophy; which opens an immense field for still new discoveries. But is there not likewise a pleasure therein, as well as in mathematical and metaphysical studies, which does not result from the imagination, but from the exercise of the understanding? Unless we will say, that the newness of the discoveries which we make by mathematical or metaphysical researches is one reason at least, if not the chief, of the pleasure we receive therefrom.

14. I dwell the longer on these things, because so very few see them in the true point of view. The generality of men, and more particularly men of sense and learning, are so far from suspecting that there is, or can be, the least harm in them, that they seriously believe it is matter of great praise to *give ourselves wholly to them*. Who of them, for instance, would not admire and commend the indefatigable industry of that great philosopher who says, “I have been now eight-and-thirty years at my parish of Upminster; and I have made it clear, that there are no less than three-and-fifty species of butterflies therein: But if God should spare my life a few years longer, I do not doubt but I should demonstrate, there are five-and-fifty!” I allow that most of these studies have their use, and that it is possible to *use* without *abusing* them. But if we seek our happiness in any of these things, then it commences to be an *idol*. And the enjoyment of it, however it may be admired and applauded by the world, is condemned by God as neither better nor worse than damnable *idolatry*.

15. The third kind of love of the world, the Apostle speaks of under that uncommon expression, *he alazoneia ta biou*. This is rendered by our translators,

the pride of life. It is usually supposed to mean, the pomp and splendour of those that are in high life. But has it not a more extensive sense? Does it not rather mean, the seeking happiness in the praise of men, which, above all things engenders pride? When this is pursued in a more pompous way by kings or illustrious men, we call it “thirst for glory;” when it is sought in a lower way by ordinary men, it is styled, “taking care of our reputation.” In plain terms, it is seeking the honour that comes of men, instead of that which comes from God only.

16. But what creates a difficulty here is this: We are required not only to “give no offence to anyone,” and to “provide things honest in the sight of all men,” but to “please all men for their good to edification.” But how difficult is it to do this, with a single eye to God! We ought to do all that in us lies, to prevent “the good that is in us from being evil spoken of.” Yea, we ought to value a clear reputation, if it be given us, only less than a good conscience. But yet, if we seek our happiness therein, we are liable to perish in our idolatry.

17. To which of the preceding heads is the *love of money* to be referred? Perhaps sometimes to one, and sometimes to another; as it is a means of procuring gratifications, either for “the desire of the flesh,” or for “the desire of the eyes,” or for “the pride of life.” In any of these cases, money is only pursued in order to a farther end. But it is sometimes pursued for its own sake, without any farther view. One who is properly a miser loves and seeks money for its own sake. He looks no farther, but places his happiness in the acquiring or the possessing of it. And this is a species of idolatry distinct from all the preceding; and indeed, the lowest, basest idolatry of which the human soul is capable. To seek happiness either in gratifying this or any other of the desires above mentioned, is effectually to renounce the true God, and to set up an idol in his place. In a word, so many objects as there are in the world, wherein men seek happiness instead of seeking it in God, so many *idols* they set up in their hearts, so many species of *idolatry* they practise.

18. I would take notice of only one more, which, though it in some measure falls in with several of the preceding, yet, in many respects, is distinct from them all. I mean the idolizing a human creature. Undoubtedly it is the will of God that we should all love one another. It is his will that we should love our relations and our Christian brethren with a peculiar love; and those in particular, whom he has made particularly profitable to our souls. These we are commanded to “love fervently;” yet still “with a pure heart.” But is not this “impossible with man?” to retain the strength and tenderness of affection, and yet, without any stain to the soul, with unspotted purity? I do not mean only unspotted by lust. I know this is possible. I know a person may have an unutterable affection for another without any desire of this kind. But is it without idolatry? Is it not loving the creature more than the Creator? Is it not putting a man or woman in the place of God, giving them your heart? Let this be carefully considered, even by those whom God has joined together; by husbands and wives, parents and children. It cannot be denied, that these ought to love one another tenderly: they are commanded so to do. But they are neither commanded nor permitted to love one another idolatrously. Yet how common is this! How frequently is a husband, a wife, a child, put in the place of God. How many that are accounted good Christians fix their affections on each other, so as to leave no place for God! They seek their happiness in the creature, not in the Creator. One may truly say to the other,

I view you, lord and end of my desires.

That is, “I desire nothing more but you! You are the thing that I long for! All my desire is to you, and to the remembrance of your name.” Now, if this is not flat idolatry, I cannot tell what is.

II. Having largely considered what those idols are of which the Apostle speaks, I will come now to inquire (which may be done more briefly) how we may keep ourselves from them.

1. In order to this, I would advise you, First, be deeply convinced that none of them bring happiness; that no thing, no person under the sun, no, nor the

amassment of all together, can give any solid, satisfactory happiness to any child of man. The world itself, the giddy, thoughtless world, acknowledge this unawares, while they allow, nay, vehemently maintain, “No man upon earth is contented.” The very same observation was made nearly two thousand years ago:

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Nemo quam sibi sortem
 Seu ratio dederit, seu fors objecerit, illa
 Contentus vivat.

Let fortune or let choice the station give
 To man, yet none on earth contented live.

And if no man upon earth is contented, it is certain no man is happy. For whatever station we are in, discontent is incompatible with happiness.

2. Indeed not only the giddy, but the thinking, part of the world allow that no man is contented; the melancholy proofs of which we see on every side, in high and low, rich and poor. And, generally, the more understanding they have, the more discontented they are. For,

They know with more distinction to complain,
 And have superior sense in feeling pain.

It is true, every one has (to use the cant term of the day, and an excellent one it is) *his hobby-horse*; something that pleases the great boy for a few hours or days, and wherein he *hopes* to be happy! But though

Hope blooms eternal in the human breast;
 Man never *is*, but always *to be*, blest.

Still he is walking in a vain shadow, which will soon vanish away! So that universal experience, both our own, and that of all our friends and acquaintances, clearly proves, that as God made our hearts for himself, so they cannot rest till they rest in him; that till we acquaint ourselves with him, we cannot be at peace.

As “a scorner” of the wisdom of God “seeks wisdom, and finds it not;” so a scorner of happiness in God seeks happiness, but finds none.

3. When you are thoroughly convinced of this, I advise you, Secondly, stand and consider what you are about. Will you be a fool and a madman all your days? Is it not high time to come to your senses! At length, awake out of sleep, and shake yourself from the dust! Break loose from this miserable idolatry, and “choose the better part!” Steadily resolve to seek happiness where it may be found; where it cannot be sought in vain. Resolve to seek it in the true God, the fountain of all blessedness; and cut off all delay! Straightway put in execution what you have resolved! Seeing “all things are ready,” “acquaint yourself now with him, and be at peace.”

4. But do not either resolve, or attempt to execute your resolution, trusting in your own strength. If you do, you will be utterly foiled. You are not able to contend with the evil world, much less with your own evil heart; and least of all, with the powers of darkness. Cry, therefore, to the Strong for strength. Under a deep sense of your own weakness and helplessness, trust in the Lord Jehovah, in whom is everlasting strength. I advise you to cry to him for repentance in particular; not only for a full consciousness of your own impotence, but for a piercing sense of the exceeding guilt, baseness, and madness of the idolatry that has long swallowed you up. Cry for a thorough knowledge of yourself; of all your sinfulness and guiltiness. Pray that you may be fully discovered to yourself; that you may know yourself as also you are known. When once you are possessed of this genuine conviction, all your idols will lose their charms. And you will wonder, how you could so long lean upon those broken reeds, which had so often sunk under you.

5. What should you ask for next?

“Jesus, now I have lost my all,

Let me upon your bosom fall!

Now let me see you in your vesture dipped in blood!

Now stand in all your wounds confest,
And wrap me in your crimson vest!

Have you not said, 'If you can believe, you shall see the glory of God?' Lord, *I would* believe! Help mine unbelief. And help me *now!* Help me now to enter into the rest that remains for the people of God; for those who give you their heart, their whole heart; who receive you as their God and their All. O thou that are fairer than the children of men, full of grace are your lips! Speak that I may see you! And as the shadows flee before the sun, so let all my idols vanish at your presence!"

6. From the moment that you begin to experience this, fight the good fight of faith; take the kingdom of heaven by violence! Take it as it were by storm! Deny yourself every pleasure that you are not divinely conscious brings you nearer to God. Take up your cross daily. Regard no pain, if it lies in your way to him. If you are called thereto, scruple not to pluck out the right eye, and to cast it from you. Nothing is impossible to him who believes. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. Do valiantly; and stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made you free. Yea, go on in his name, and in the power of his might, till you "know all that love of God that passes knowledge." And then you have only to wait till he shall call you into his everlasting kingdom!