

Idolatry Then and Now

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For anyone who is familiar with the record of scripture, the one thing you can't help but come away with is that Israel had a record of worshipping anything but the true God. Let's look at the very first commandment God gave Israel in Exodus 20:1. We know this by heart but in context and reference to the subject at hand (we'll get into that in just a minute), let's go back to that scripture. God knew human nature and He knew Satan; he knows Satan and He knows what was going to happen, and the very first commandment tells us that ...

Exodus 20:1 ... *God spake all these words, saying,*

2) I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

3) [Notice what He says] Thou shalt have no other gods before me. (KJV)

The Hebrew word for *gods* is "Elohim". He's telling Israel, you don't put *anything* in front of Me. That is the very first commandment and it's interesting that God would make this the very first commandment, and we're going to see why today. Notice the second commandment in verse 4—it addresses the very same subject.

4) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

5) Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation [notice this last phrase] of them that hate me; (KJV)

God says here that when we put anything in front of Him, when we serve anything in front of Him or before Him, we hate Him. That's a scary thought. Do you think maybe God might have known something about human nature or known something about Satan for Him to make such a statement—obviously so. God repeatedly warned Israel about idolatry, He warned them strongly in the book of Deuteronomy before they entered into the Promised Land because He knew their tendency, He knew human nature, He knew Satan and Satan's provocations.

Let's look at three in the book of Deuteronomy toward the beginning, then toward the middle, and at the end, to see this was a theme throughout Deuteronomy, and God kept warning and warning and warning Israel. Deuteronomy 8:19—He knew idolatry was a problem and would be a problem through the existence of Israel.

Deuteronomy 8:19 *And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, [forget in turning away from God, not being close to God] and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish.*

20) *As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God. (KJV)*

Remember Israel heard God's voice from Mount Sinai—they heard it directly with the hearing of their own ears, and God commanded them and He said, if you're not going to be obedient to what I tell you, you will perish. Now let's jump to chapter 11, verse 16—another warning from God on this very same subject.

Deuteronomy 11:16 *Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside ... (KJV)*

The Hebrew word for *turn aside* is “to withdraw”—in other words, you'd better not withdraw from Me, put distance between you and Me, turn aside,

16 continued) *... and serve other gods, and worship them;*
17) *And then the LORD's wrath be kindled against you ... (KJV)*

God is saying, My anger will come to the surface if you put anything before Me, you turn aside, you withdraw from Me.

17 continued) *... and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you. (KJV)*

This tells us that God becomes angry when we don't put Him first and I don't think any of us want God angry with us. We want to please God, we want—as the phrase in the Old Testament puts it—God's face to shine upon us. We do not want to be at cross purposes with God Almighty.

Now let's go to the end of Deuteronomy 30:17—Moses is telling them, instructed by God, you have some choices to make in your life. We talked about that a while back.

Deuteronomy 30:17 [Moses is saying] *But if thine heart turn away, so that thou wilt not hear, but shalt be drawn away [by the lust of the eyes or the lust of the flesh or the provocations of Satan], and worship other gods, and serve them;*
18) [Look what happens] *I denounce unto you this day, that ye shall surely perish, and that ye shall not prolong your days upon the land, whither thou passest over Jordan to go to possess it.*
19) I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before

you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:

20) *That thou mayest love the LORD thy God, and that thou mayest obey his voice, and that thou mayest cleave unto him: [not to any other—cleave to God, obey God, love God, not any other God] for he is thy life, and the length of thy days: that thou mayest dwell in the land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.* (KJV)

That is God Almighty, that is God the Father, as we've talked about many, many times. Throughout the Old Testament God gives warnings against idolatry because He knew Satan would try to provoke human beings to worship anything but the true God—anything but the true God. Idolatry has always been a problem for those whom God has chosen because Satan comes after them and we all have human nature. We as His children today must learn from the record of scripture about the problems of turning to idolatry. God expects us, as His children, today, to learn from the record of scripture. So the title of the sermon is:

Idolatry Then and Now

In the record of scripture and today—idolatry then and now. The first point we're going to make is:

1. God instructs us about idols through His prophet Isaiah.

If you read the book of Isaiah, it is a theme that runs through Isaiah: idolatry and the worship of idols. This book contains a series of chapters that show God in stark contrast to idols—draws this stark portrayal of God versus idols. The name Isaiah means “YHVH is salvation”—very appropriate. Isaiah prophesied approximately from 740 to 689 B.C. As we're going to see, he was a man of high rank in the government of the day. Isaiah talks about the utter foolishness of making an idol. It's almost laughable. Let's go to Isaiah 44:13; I'm going to read it out of the New King James.

Isaiah 44:13 [Notice this, it is almost laughable, it certainly is to God because He is scoffing] *The craftsman stretches out his rule, He marks one out with chalk; He fashions it with a plane, He marks it out with the compass, And makes it like the figure of a man, According to the beauty of a man, that it may remain in the house.*

14) *He cuts down cedars for himself, And takes the cypress and the oak; He secures it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a pine, and the rain nourishes it.*

15) *Then it shall be for a man to burn, For he will take some of it and warm himself; Yes, he kindles it and bakes bread [from this wood]; Indeed he makes a god and worships it; He makes it a carved image, and falls down to it.* (NKJV)

God is saying, this man's god comes from the same source that he uses for fuel—how dumb is that?

16) *He burns half of it in the fire; With this half he eats meat; He roasts a roast, and is satisfied. He even warms himself and says, "Ah! I am warm, I have seen the fire."*

17) [Notice] *And the rest of it he makes into a god, His carved image. He falls down before it and worships it, Prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god!"*

18) *They do not know nor understand; For He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, And their hearts, so that they cannot understand.*

19) *And no one considers in his heart, Nor is there knowledge nor understanding to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire, Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals; I have roasted meat and eaten it; And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?"* (KJV)

How crazy is that to say this piece of wood that cooks food for me, makes me warm, I'm also going to carve it up and bow down and worship it—how ridiculous is that?

King Hezekiah also knew idolatry was common because he and Judah were in a very tight straight, as we're going to read about (you can be turning to Isaiah 36). Hezekiah ruled from approximately 729 B.C. to 699 B.C., and he was a righteous man before God and he knew the nations around him were filled with idolatry. Let's go to Isaiah 36:1.

Isaiah 36:1 *Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, [Isaiah was his chief counselor so Isaiah was right there] that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah, and took them.* (KJV)

Sennacherib had already taken the northern Ten Tribes into captivity. Now he was coming against Judah.

2) *And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army. And he stood by the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller's field.* (KJV)

He's standing below the walls of Jerusalem, he's shouting up there and all the people on the top of the walls are listening because he is trying to demoralize them and put pressure on Hezekiah.

4) *And Rabshakeh said unto them, Say ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest?*

18) *Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you [he's talking to the people on the wall], saying, The LORD will deliver us. Hath any of the gods of the nations delivered his land out of the hand of the king of Assyria?* (KJV)

You've seen us, we've destroyed them all, and we're coming against you.

19) *Where are the gods of Hamath and Arphad? where are the gods of Sepharvaim? and have they delivered Samaria [the name of the northern Ten Tribes] out of my hand? (KJV)*

All these nations worshipped man-made idols, and Rabshakeh is saying these idols didn't deliver these nations and these cities—we've conquered them all. In Samaria's case, they rejected the true God and they also turned to idolatry, and they were not spared either. Now look at chapter 37, verse 1.

Isaiah 37:1 *And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD. (KJV)*

He went to God directly. For the sake of time let's jump to verse 14.

14) *And Hezekiah received the letter [this is from Rabshakeh] from the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up unto the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD. (KJV)*

He took it directly to God and said, this is what they're saying about You; this is what they're saying they're going to do to us.

15) *And Hezekiah prayed unto the LORD [notice what he said] ...*

16) *O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, that dwellest between the cherubims, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth: thou hast made heaven and earth. (KJV)*

He's contrasting the LORD of Hosts—and we've proved several times scripture shows that the LORD of Hosts refers to God the Father—Hezekiah is contrasting the LORD of Hosts, who made all the earth and everything that's in it, the universe and everything that's in the universe, with idols made by the hand of man.

17) *Incline thine ear, O LORD, and hear; open thine eyes, O LORD, and see: and hear all the words of Sennacherib, which hath sent to reproach the living God. (KJV)*

We see here that the LORD of Hosts, the Living God, are all names for God Almighty. Hezekiah knew who He was praying to—he had no doubt who he was praying to.

18) *Of a truth, LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries [these nations that worshipped man-made idols],*

19) *And have cast their gods into the fire: for they were no gods, but the work of men's hands, wood and stone: therefore they have destroyed them.*

20) *Now therefore, O LORD our God [the true God, the one God], save us from his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that thou art the LORD, even thou only. (KJV)*

Hezekiah was not just asking for deliverance for his nation and for his people; in addition to that he wanted all the nations to see the foolishness and the hopelessness of their idolatry. In this last sentence in verse 20: that they may know that You are the true God, You only. He wanted them to recognize the power and the authority of the true God and see the absolute stupidity and folly of worshipping a man-made idol, and this thread runs through the book of Isaiah, and Isaiah keeps saying over and over that God is supreme over all His creation, He is not like the gods of other nations—they cannot even be compared to Him. Look at chapter 40, verse 18—Isaiah is asking a question.

Isaiah 40:18 *To whom then will ye liken God? [Who can you compare God to?] or what likeness will ye compare unto him? (KJV)*

Can you carve an image that somehow resembles God? Let's jump to verse 25. Now God makes a similar statement.

25) *To whom then will ye liken me [God is saying], or shall I be equal? saith the Holy One.*

26) *Lift up your eyes on high [look at the night sky], and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he [God] calleth them [the stars] all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth. (KJV)*

Last time we talked about what God has created and there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on every beach on earth, and God knows every one by name, just like He knows us by name. God is saying through Isaiah, you compare Me to a block of wood, you compare Me to a piece of stone. There is no comparison.

27) *Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, my way is hid from the LORD [in other words, God is not aware of what I'm doing or thinking or saying], and my judgment [the Hebrew means "my penalty" or "my sentence"] is passed over from my God? (KJV)*

Meaning God winks at my sins, God ignores my thoughts and my deeds.

28) *Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not [He doesn't take a nap, He doesn't go to sleep, He doesn't faint], neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. (KJV)*

Yet today, people believe that they can sin and somehow God doesn't know it, God doesn't see it, God doesn't hear it and somehow they can live a double life—the church life, the Sabbath life, the holy day life, and then the rest of the week somehow God doesn't hear or see or know their thoughts.

Let's notice God's preface to His description of the construction of an idol—we read it in Isaiah 44:13-19 but let's look at the preface to that, so turn to Isaiah 44 because we're going to see how God is scoffing at the foolishness of idolatry. Isaiah 44:7; I'm going to read verse 7 out of the New Living Translation then we'll go back to the King James. God is speaking, notice what He says.

Isaiah 44:7 *Who else can tell you what is going to happen in the days ahead? [Can anybody else do that?] Let them tell you if they can and thus prove their power. Let them do as I have done since ancient times. [Let's see your gods of wood and stone do that.] (NLT)*

8) Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? [God says] yea, there is no God; I know not any. (KJV)

Who can make this statement but God Almighty? Who can make a prophecy and then down the road have that prophecy totally fulfilled in every detail—only God can do that. Look at the next chapter, Isaiah 45; we'll just read the beginning of verse 5. Again, it's a theme, and I want to emphasize that.

Isaiah 45:5 *I am the LORD, and there is none else, there is no God beside me: (KJV)*

Only the Most High God, only the Almighty God can make this declaration.

Let's notice again in Isaiah the one specific constant contrast that God goes on to make concerning idols versus Himself—let's go to chapter 41, beginning in verse 8.

Isaiah 41:8 *But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend. (KJV)*

Now let's go back to verse 4.

4) Who hath wrought and done it, calling the generations from the beginning? I the LORD, the first, and with the last; I am he. (KJV)

Talking about the first and last, let's go to chapter 44 and verse 6; I'm going to read this out of the New Living Translation where this statement is made again.

Isaiah 44:6 *This is what the LORD—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD*

Almighty [this can only be God] says: “*I am the First and the Last; there is no other God.* (NLT)

The Bible shows, we’ve talked about it for months and months, that the LORD Almighty is God the Father—no question about that. God is saying, I existed before any idols were ever made because I have no beginning. I know it’s hard for us to get our heads around God having no beginning but that is the only explanation—God has existed forever. Someday as spirit beings we’ll get our head around that. The fact is, God has had no beginning, God will have no end, therefore God existed before any human beings carved an idol, and He will exist long after any idol turns to dust. He has no end.

In the statement, I am the first and I am the last, the words first and last are in contrast to idolatry, and idols made by the hands of men. God was before them, God will be after them, they are not real, there is no other God but Him. This is repeated over and over and over in the book of Isaiah. Mounce’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words states that the word “first” is sometimes paired with the word “last” to form a *merism*. “A merism is a literary device in which polar terms are used together to describe totality. Polar opposite terms are used in combination to describe totality.” Mounce goes on, “Thus, first and last means the only one.”

God says through the prophet Isaiah, I am the first, I am the last, apart from Me there is no God. That’s why He makes the statements, *first and last*. God is saying, I existed before any idols were ever made, I will exist long after they turn to dust, these idols are false, they are not real but I am because I have always been and will always be. The point made is that man-made idols are not God, only the LORD, YHVH, is the true God. Let’s go to John 17:3; Christ says it and shame on us if we don’t believe it. These are words out of Christ’s own mouth. We talked about that many times but in reference to idols; let’s read this verse in that context.

John 17:3 [Christ says] *And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, [how plain can it get, there’s only one true God] and Jesus Christ, [speaking of Himself] whom thou [God] hast sent.* (KJV)

Christ affirms that His Father is the only true God and that He, Jesus Christ, is His Son. Very simple when we wrap our head around that concept.

Let’s look at a final reference in Isaiah to God as the first and the last. Let’s go to chapter 48, and we’ll begin in verse 3. God is speaking. Isaiah is quoting God directly, so undoubtedly God talked in some form or fashion—could be through a dream or a vision; Isaiah could have heard God’s words and just wrote them down.

Isaiah 48:3 [God says] *I have declared the former things from the beginning; and they went forth out of my mouth, and I shewed them; I did them suddenly, and they came to pass.*

5) *I have even from the beginning declared it to thee; before it came to pass I shewed it thee: lest thou shouldest say [He's talking to Judah now, and by extension, to us], Mine idol hath done them, and my graven image, and my molten image, hath commanded them.*

6) *Thou hast heard, see all this; and will not ye declare it? I have shewed thee new things from this time, even hidden things, and thou didst not know them.*
(KJV)

I've shown you things that you didn't know and it came to pass, God is saying.

7) *They [referring to idols] are created now, and not from the beginning; even before the day when thou heardest them not; lest thou shouldest say, Behold, I knew them [because my idol told me so].*

12) *Hearken unto me, O Jacob and Israel, my called [we know that God does the calling, God called us personally by name, turns us over to Jesus Christ, so this is obviously referring to God the Father]; I am he; I am the first, I also am the last.*

13) *Mine hand also hath laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand hath spanned the heavens: when I call unto them, they stand up together.* (KJV)

God refers to Himself as the first and the last. He is the only true God, as Christ said in John 17:3. Let's go (under this first point) to a New Testament verse, 1 Corinthians 8:4, again to emphasize the fact that idols are nothing compared to the one true God. The big controversy in the New Testament Church was the eating of food offered to idols and we're breaking into that context here.

1 Corinthians 8:4 *As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world [doesn't mean a thing], and that there is none other God but one.*

5) *For though there be that are called gods [things out there that are called gods], whether in heaven or in earth (as there be gods many, and lords many) [they're called gods, doesn't make them gods],*

6) *But to us there is but one God, the Father, [that's pretty plain, I don't know how you can get around that one] of whom are all things, and we in him; and [in addition to one God the Father] one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.* (KJV)

Paul acknowledges that it is God, Christ's Father, who is the one true God. There is scripture after scripture that tells us. God Almighty is the only true God and that is in contrast to every false idol, every false god. God is the one, the only true God. That sums up point number one. Now, let's bring it to today, and ask the question:

2. What are some modern-day idols?

Idol worship today is a bit different than it was in the time of Ancient Israel. We don't see people very often bowing down to statues that they've made or pictures they have

painted, although in the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church that happens to this very day. [A lady here] can tell you when she was a young girl, you bow down and pray to statues, you bow down in front of pictures, you bow down in front of stained glass windows and you do all of that, yes, but out in the world today, by and large, that is not done as it was in the days of Ancient Israel—the time of Isaiah that we were just reading about. Today, Satan has provoked mankind into being a little more subtle in his idolatry. Satan has made it not so obvious in his idolatry but Satan still wants to thumb his nose at God and get people to worship anything but the true God. He is more subtle.

Idolatry, we're going to find out, is much more than bowing down before a carving of wood or of stone—it is much more than that. Ezekiel talks about this concept—that it's more than just bowing down in front of something that's made by the hands of men. Ezekiel was taken captive to Babylon in 597 B.C. and what we're going to read was written about ten years before Jerusalem was destroyed, but the warning is for us today, too. Notice what Ezekiel says; let's go to chapter 14, and we'll begin in verse 1. Ezekiel is going to state a principle that applies to us, today, as far as the subtlety that Satan has provoked in causing people to worship idols, but it is far more subtle, far less visible.

Ezekiel 14:1 [Ezekiel is speaking] *Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me. (KJV)*

This is the subject, this is who Ezekiel is referring to. When they sat in front of him, God intervened ...

2) And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying ... (KJV)

God knew what they were up to and God intervened and put these thoughts, these words, in Ezekiel's mind. This is what God said:

3) Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart ... (KJV)

These elders, these potentates of Israel have set up idols in their heart. The Hebrew word for *heart* means the “center of anything”, meaning the center of our being, the core of our being.

3 continued) ... and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them? (KJV)

Who are they, God is saying, to come and start questioning Me, these men who put idols in their heart?

4) Therefore speak unto them, and say unto them, Thus saith the LORD God; [How would you like to be on the receiving end of this?] Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of

his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet [as they were doing at that moment]; I the LORD will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; (KJV)

The strength of My answer is going to be determined by how many idols you worship in your heart.

5) That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols. (KJV)

The Hebrew word for *estranged* means “to turn aside” or “to be a stranger”. God is saying, the fact that they are worshipping their idols, have turned their backs away from Me and they are becoming a stranger to Me—I don’t know them because they will not worship Me.

6) Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the LORD God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations.

7) For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel [the Gentile], which separateth himself from me [this is what idolatry does, it separates us from the true God], and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to enquire of him concerning me [as they were this very day]; I the LORD will answer him by myself:

8) And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the LORD. (KJV)

Pretty serious stuff. God is not happy with this. What God is telling us through this narrative is that idolatry is much more than just the physical act of bowing down before an idol, because it says over and over, in your heart—in the center or the core of one’s being. Let’s look at some modern-day idols of the heart as opposed to bowing down before wood and stone; people bow down to different things today but they’re still idols.

2A. Focusing one’s heart on the physical, not on the spiritual.

The most common is money or what money can buy—possessions, power, title, prestige—all of which is pride and vanity, and if that’s our focus we’re putting that in front of God Almighty. If that’s where we spend our time—that’s where our thoughts are—then it’s before God. Of course the world out there doesn’t know that but they keep striving and striving over physical things that will ultimately perish. God says, I’ll be around long after those physical things are turned to dust. People today want the biggest homes—driving here to Church you see these trophy homes, these mega homes and it just boggles the mind. We had an orchard torn out across the street from us and a very wealthy man bought this whole orchard and he is building himself a

mansion. I happened to bump into him, my wife and I were taking a walk, and I said, you're the guy that owns this? He says, yeah, I bought it, we're going to build a home up here, and I said, mind me asking how big it's going to be? He said, we're downsizing, it's 11,000 square feet. Downsizing! People today, it's a trophy—look at me, look at who I am. They want the most expensive cars, these gigantic yachts, airplanes at their disposal, all the toys of adult life—that's the focus. Let's go to 1 John 2:16, very familiar scripture. Let's read it relative to idolatry. Let's say the more sophisticated idolatry we have today. I'm going to read this out of the NIV.

1 John 2:16 *For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting of what he has and does [that's an interesting phrase] —comes not from the Father but from the world. (NIV)*

This idolatry in the heart of people who engage in this form of idolatry comes from pride, comes from lust, from vanity, to elevate the self in the eyes of those around. Focusing one's heart on the physical.

2B. Placing a human being at the center of one's worship.

Think about that, that sounds relative to what we've read in Isaiah and what we know—how can you put a human being in front of God or worship a human being in place of God? The Catholics worship the pope as their father. The pope replaces God, they call him “Papa”—he is their father. They worship Mary as the mother of God. That goes back to paganism long before the flood—putting human beings in front of God Almighty. In some ways it crept into the the Church of God—the Worldwide Church of God, in this instance, because some people came to almost (and in some cases did) worship Mr. Herbert Armstrong. We respected Mr. Armstrong for what God did through him, but some felt that every word he said, every word he wrote was God-breathed. They put him on that level, and, in many cases some came to almost literally worship him. Some still do so today, believing that at his death, all doctrine was frozen—there's nothing more to learn, there's nothing more to be said, there's nothing more to investigate in the scriptures, there's no more growth in that area, believing that everything stopped with his death. Today, some idolize the head of their organization and some of those heads encourage that idolization.

Another area of placing a human or physical things at the center of one's worship is some place an organization at the center of their attention—in other words looking to headquarters. How many times did we hear that in those old days? Looking to buildings or a campus, as the Catholics would look to the Vatican and Saint Peter's Basilica and all of that, or looking to the work, meaning the books, the magazines, the TV programs, which is basically saying look at us, look at what we're doing and you're not. Again, pride and vanity and ego. In the Worldwide days brethren looked to Pasadena. Pasadena was a beautiful place, there's no question about it—it was millennial—just a gorgeous place to walk around and be part of, absolutely. I'm not detracting from that at all. I know people that looked to the auditorium in Pasadena as

the Jews looked to the Temple in Christ's day. It was almost like that was the center of worship, so to speak, and idolized that building as the Jews idolized the Temple. The problem with all of this is it gets our attention off of God—onto humans, onto organizations, onto buildings, onto booklets and magazines and TV programs, and we get our attention off of God Almighty.

A third, point C, and this is the worst of all.

2C. Placing ourselves at the center of our attention.

Let's go to 2 Timothy 3:1 and see that this is prophesied for this very day and it is the mantra of the modern generation. We know it by heart but let's read this from the context or the viewpoint of idolatry.

2 Timothy 3:1 *This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.*
(KJV)

The Greek for *perilous* means “dangerous” or “difficult”. Dangerous because you could lose your salvation, difficult because Satan is going to try to derail us. Why are these days so perilous and dangerous and difficult?

2) For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers ... (KJV)

Blasphemers put down God and generally blasphemers put down God to elevate themselves. What is the common saying today?—it's all about me—everything's about me! Everybody else can go jump in the lake but I am the focus, it's all about me, and I'm going to be satisfied, and I'm going to do what I want to do, and I'm going to think what I want to think, and nobody's going to tell me what to do. That is the society today. The self becomes the focus, before God, in place of God, in front of God.

We've seen that in the Church of God. Ministers aggrandizing themselves, ministers wanting a following, ministers promoting themselves, brethren proud of what they know that others don't know—I have special knowledge and you don't have this special knowledge, therefore I'm up here and you're down here—we've seen that. Or where they say our group is the only group God is dealing with, and if you're not part of our group you're not part of the true Church. They might condescendingly say, you're kind of part of the Church but you're Laodicean and I'm not. Again, it's aggrandizing the self—putting the self as the focus rather than God, rather than saying, God, who are we to even be here, who are we to even be called, who are we to even have your Holy Spirit? Even more subtle than that is the insistence on having one's own way. That is idolatry.

When people say, you have to do it my way or I'm out of here, does it ever occur that maybe your way is not God's way? You're saying, I'm going to do it my way and if you (whoever it is) don't do it my way, I'm gone, but my way is not God's way and I'm putting

myself at cross purposes with God. To place the self above all is idolatry, plain and simple. Far more sophisticated than the bowing down—we would never think about bowing down before a stone or wooden idol—but people quite easily say today, it's my way or the highway, and if you say that to God, that's idolatry.

I've been in situations where some people want a minister to do their will and the sad thing is their will is counter to what the Bible says, and you can't do that so I can't fulfill their will and if you don't fulfill their will, they leave ("I'm out of here!") and they'll go shopping to some other group or some other minister that will do what they want, and in the meantime, they're throwing rocks at the group that doesn't do what they want, and slander and accusations, and all of that. It is very subtle and Satan knows human nature, he's done a masterful job of getting people to put themselves first, especially when they say, my way or the highway. You do it my way or I'm out of here. My way is the only way and God doesn't come into the picture, and that is kind of scary.

Let's go to Luke 14:7—a parable of Jesus Christ. He knew human nature, he really did. He had to fight it every day of His life and He lived a perfect life. I'm sure human thoughts and urges came up to Jesus Christ which He immediately rejected but He understood. That's why He said things like this, put forth this parable.

Luke 14:7 *And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them,*

8) *When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room [don't sit in the great room in front of the fireplace in the softest chair]; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him;*

9) *And he that bade thee [invited you] and him come and say to thee [can you get out of this chair and go sit somewhere else because I've got somebody that's a little higher than you and he's going to be taking your place], Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room.*

10) *But when thou art bidden [when you're invited], go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that [invited you] bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.*

11) [Here's the principle] *For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.* (KJV)

It doesn't happen right away; God is patient, God gives us time to change, God brings circumstances to pass for us to see ourself but if we don't, there's going to come a time when God says, I don't want you sitting here, you don't belong here. You've exalted yourself the whole time. you've put yourself in front of Me and you're not going to sit in this place. Not going to sit at the marriage supper, in fact you might be swimming in a lake someday—the lake of fire. Satan's goal for us is the same as his goal was for Ancient Israel. To get us to worship anything but the true God. The fact is, it is so easy to put ourselves first—it is so easy because what is on our mind is the most important thing in the world, what we want is the most important thing in the world. We get up a

head of steam and go plowing through people and we leave a trail of disaster behind us because we put ourselves first and never stop and ask the question, is this what Christ would do, is this what God would do, is this what God wants me to do, is this that I'm thinking or saying or doing something that is pleasing to God—we never think about that, we just blow on through it because that's what I want. We see the idolatry that Satan has provoked in modern days is far more subtle than the idolatry of simply bowing down to something of wood or stone.

The third and last point (getting close to the end), and this is the key:

3. How can we guard against idolatry?

How can we guard against it? Let's go to 2 Corinthians 5:18. We're going to read these few scriptures here, verses 18 and 19—notice the emphasis on one word or variations of one word. Notice the very first statement—this puts everything in perspective.

2 Corinthians 5:18 *And all things are of God [pretty straightforward and we'll see who God is], who hath reconciled us to himself [God] by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;* (KJV)

Here in verse 18 we have heard the words *reconciled* and *reconciliation*.

19) *To wit, that God was in Christ [when Christ walked this earth, God was in Him through His very Spirit—the Holy Spirit], reconciling the world unto himself [unto God], not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.*

20) *Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.* (KJV)

Five times, two verses, the words *reconciled*, *reconciling* and *reconciliation* are used—there's an emphasis there so the question logically comes, what can we do to be reconciled to God? The answer, as many answers are, is very simple; to do it is very difficult, given our human nature and given Satan. What can we do to be reconciled to God? Eliminate anything that comes between us and God. Real simple—anything that would come between us and God we have to get rid of, eliminate. Christ said that from His own mouth—what should come first? Let's go to Mark 12:28. A scribe comes to Christ and asks him the most profound question. It's a simple question but it is a profound question because it gets to the core of what we should be doing.

Mark 12:28 *And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him [he's asking Jesus Christ, the Son of the true God], Which is the first commandment of all?*
29) *And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:* (KJV)

That's kind of odd because he's asking about a commandment and this is a statement. In the early years in the Church I had a problem with this scripture because it just didn't make sense to me, because, as translated, it is a statement—it is not a commandment. When the Worldwide Church of God turned to the trinity, the Tkachs used this verse as proof of the trinity: One Lord—meaning Holy Spirit, Christ, God, were all the same—the trinity. They did that despite the fact that the truth of this verse had been known within the Worldwide Church of God, taught at Ambassador College for decades but that was completely wiped away.

We've explained this previously but we do have some new brethren so let me briefly explain this. Christ is quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 so let's turn there. This is very important, I know we've covered it before, it's always good to review and for those who might be hearing it for the first time, it's something to really study.

Deuteronomy 6:4 *Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:* (KJV)

This is not a correct translation. It's one of the areas where the King James just gets it wrong, and the other translations follow suit and get it wrong. Let's remember that in the Hebrew there are only six words and I'm going to read them to you, you can write them down if you wish, or go to an interlinear translation and look them up for yourself.

The six words in Hebrew are: *Shama*, then the word *Israel* (which we all know and understand), *YHVH* (which we know about), *Elohim* (which we know about), then *YHVH* is repeated, and then the last word is *Echad*. We know that there was no punctuation in the Hebrew, that was added by translators, and if you turn to Deuteronomy 6:4 (at least in the King James) the word "is" will be in italics—it is not in the Hebrew, it was added by translators, and my strong suspicion is it was added by trinitarian translators—that was their background, that's where they were coming from.

We're familiar with the words *Israel*, *YHVH* (which means "the Eternal"), and *Elohim*—we're familiar with all of those but we're not familiar with the first and the last words, *Shama* and *Echad*. *Shama* is Strong's #8085 and it means *to hear intelligently, to understand or to obey*, and of the six words in this verse, *Shama* is the only one that's a verb, therefore there's no need for the word "is"—no need for it at all. This verb is in the imperative which means it's a command or an order, and something in the imperative requires a predicate—something to obey or something to hear—and that's exactly what Christ was asked: What do I do first, which is the first commandment?

So now you put the first four words together, it means, Hear and obey, oh Israel, the LORD God. Now it's a commandment, it's not a statement. Hear and obey oh Israel the LORD God. Now we come to the last word, *Echad*, it's Strong's #259, and it just means "first" or "only". So when you put all the words together, *Shama Israel YHVH Elohim YHVH Echad*, it becomes very clear: *Hear and obey Oh Israel the LORD God alone*, or if you want to translate it "first", the LORD God *first*—don't put anything in front of God. There's no need for punctuation because it is now a command and it is very,

very understandable. Look at the context of Deuteronomy 6. In Deuteronomy 5 are the Ten Commandments; Deuteronomy 6, in the first three verses, are commandments, so this fits right in as a commandment even though it's been mistranslated in the King James. This has been known since the '70s, the correct translation of this, but people buried it because it interfered with the trinity—sad to say.

The point is, once we understand what this man came to Christ and asked, what is the first commandment, what's the most important one, what should I do first, we have the answer: Hear and obey God only. Hear and obey God first. Christ gave the answer out of His own mouth—it's the first commandment. We read it at the very beginning today. How do we guard against idolatry? Put God first, obey God only. Really simple. The greatest thing we can do to avoid idolatry is to hear and obey the LORD God, the LORD alone—nothing else. Putting nothing before Him.

Let's conclude now. God says, I'm the first and I'm the last. God says, I was before any human being that ever existed. I was before anything that man has made and I will be alive after the last human is dead. After the last thing any man has ever made, I will be alive after all of that is long gone. Therefore, we have to ask the question, should we look to anything other than God? Since He was there before it all began, He will exist after it's all gone, is there anything we should look to other than God—of course not! How can we put anything before God, especially ourselves, especially another human being or something physical?

God is greater than all and we have to have the humility—sometimes I shake my head and say, who are we to even have a personal relationship with God? Who are we to have a personal relationship with God? This Being that existed before creation would call us personally—reach down, pick us out, dust us off, tell us about His word, to offer His Son and have His Son willingly offer Himself for our sins so that we can be children in His Kingdom—who are we to have that happen, here, right now? We're not worthy of any of that. So who is this God—should we put anything before Him that did this for us? Of course not! We have to keep our focus on God, we cannot put anything in front of God, and if we do that we will permanently eliminate the sin of idolatry in our life.