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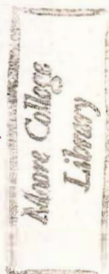


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Back to God Hour

**OUR
MODERN
IDOLS**



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DENOMINATIONAL BROADCAST
OF THE REFORMED CHURCHES
OF AUSTRALIA

OUR MODERN IDOLS

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

I don't know about you, but whenever I plan to travel to a country that is entirely unknown to me, I like to find someone who has been there so that I can benefit from his advice. "What's it like over there?" I ask. "Should I take my overcoat, or won't I need one that time of year?" And sometimes I ask, "Is there anything I have to be especially careful of?" Some-time ago I took my first trip to Africa, and there are many things about that part of the world that are very different from the environment in my part of the world. I appreciated a great deal the advice I received before I left.

At the beginning of a new year, all of us are about to begin a long journey into the unknown. The future is unknown, isn't it? To be sure, the new born science (if science it may be called) of futurology now claims to furnish us with important data about the future, but much of it is fairly useless for us as individuals. Futurists, I am told, are willing, for a reasonable price, to conduct studies on just about any aspect of the future, and one of their recent studies involves how much dental floss would be used in the years ahead. One ten-year forecast produced by the Institute of the Future reveals that "the use of dental floss may increase from 15 to 25 percent for even low-income adults." Such knowledge doesn't really change my feeling that the future is very uncertain. I would still like to talk with someone who has been there before I start my own trip into the New Year.

There is no one like that, unfortunately; there is no one who has been through the New Year—all of us are simply going to have to link arms and march into it one step at a time, one day at a time. One might remind me that God knows what the future is going to hold and might even add that God is in control of the future. I would agree. But even God has not yet experienced September of this new year—September still has to happen. But God does have some good advice

for us as we begin, and I would like to examine it with you for a little while today.

The advice God gives is found in the book He wrote through His Holy Spirit—the Bible—and a very practical book it is. Those who know it well benefit greatly from the careful way this book describes the best way to live and the best way to die. Those who know it well have the privilege of knowing Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, and as they learn more about Him through continuous contact with the Bible, they benefit from what may be called "actual personal fellowship" with Jesus.

I say the Bible is practical, and it most certainly is—considerably more practical than other religious books that are being circulated among us these days. Most religious books are very spiritual and claim to be able to pry flesh-and-blood human beings away from their environment and lift them to a more exalted plane. The Bible isn't really that way. When one reads it, one gets the strong impression that the people who wrote it were flesh-and-blood human beings themselves who sometimes became sick, who often became tired, and who occasionally became tense and irritable. Even Jesus, who is so prominent on the Bible's pages, is portrayed as a human being who was just like we are, though without sin. I know: Jesus was God, and He is God, but the Bible shows Him as a being fully human. So it is that reading books written by practical people such as the authors of the Bible were and learning from Jesus who was entirely practical Himself can be a very great help for those who move forward into a new year.

At the beginning of a new year there are any number of sentences found in the Bible that could be selected as the advice which could well guide us into the unknown future. For now I would like to focus on just one of them, one so short and so obscure we could easily overlook it. It is found in the book of 1 John in the New Testament. It is this simple statement (actually it is a command): "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

This brief statement is easy to miss, as I mentioned,

and one reason for this is that it is the very last statement in a very deep and moving book. And having read all of the material that has gone before, one is tempted to come to this last statement and let it slide away into forgetfulness. But there it is; the apostle John apparently felt that after he had said all the rest, what he wanted to tell the early church in his concluding statement should be about idols: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." I believe that this command is very good advice for us as we advance into the unknown.

I like the way this statement begins. When he wrote the book called The First Letter of John, the apostle was very conscious of the various kinds of people who would read his letter. In the second chapter he specifically singled out children, young men, and fathers, and he addressed special words to each of these groups. But the dominant class which he spoke to is the class called "little children," and one gets the distinct impression that, after all is said and done, the young men and the fathers and whatever other class of people there might be are actually all best described as little children.

And we are all little children, aren't we? I am well aware that some of us have grown much, much older since the days we could technically be called by that name, but even so there are strong traces of childhood that remain in each of our hearts. It has been said that "the child is father of the man," and this is true; it is true because there is so much of the child that remains in the grown man and in the grown woman. As adults we have left many of our childhood fears behind, but at any odd moment they may suddenly appear again. And the childhood conflicts that are related to developing adolescence—do we ever throw them off completely? Our childhood emotions, our childhood uncertainties, all these still function in our hearts. So when God stops us short and suddenly places a hand on our shoulders and addresses us as "little children," we respond because we know that His description of us is accurate.

Little children, God is talking to you; and isn't it true that we certainly feel as if we are exactly that

when we face the unknown future. All we know for certain is the present and the past, with the past sometimes seeming to fade away because of our imperfect memories; and the future looms before us as a confusing mass of hope overshadowed by a hundred threats. We have dreams for our future and for the future of our children, but as we think about a whole long year before us we know that our dreams can be shattered in an instant.

There can occur a minute physiological accident somewhere deep in the recesses of our brains and all our powers can be destroyed; some chromosome deficiency programmed into our genes may finally take its toll and make us useless; there could be a gruesome accident on the highway or in the air that could crush out our fragile life in an instant, or we could be destroyed by the perverse arrangement of society which could cause us to be discarded on the trash heap. Oh, any number of a thousand calamities could befall us, and so it is that when the Lord speaks to us and says, "Little children," we know He is most surely speaking our name, and we respond, "Yes, Lord, please tell us what we should watch out for as we enter the new year." And He replies, "Be careful of the idols."

Be careful of the idols—this is the last thing we are thinking of. The idols will get you in the new year if you are not careful. The idols? What are they?

Well, they are very real, and we would make a big mistake if we thought that this advice given many centuries ago was for that age only. It is most certainly for ours as well. But to see that, one must understand the way the Bible is put together and must understand what the Bible is about. There is a great religion which forms the background of the Bible, and it is a great religion to which the Bible is absolutely opposed; it is the religion of idolatry. Once we understand it, we are able to see that that ancient religion is still around. It is in the air we breathe, and it comes into our own bodies and minds through our pores.

When we read the Bible we get the distinct impression that idols and idolatry cannot be understood

merely in terms of the images which some people use as idols. I have a thing like that which I picked up in Indonesia once long ago; it stares down at me from a high shelf in my study, a human-like form with the face of a hideous bird. Sometimes I shudder when I glance up and see it standing there, and sometimes I wonder if I should just take it outside and burn it, but then I remember that that thing in itself has no power. The material idols, the images, have power only when they represent an idolatrous system. And there are idolatrous systems, idolatrous ways of thinking and of living, which are very powerful even though they have no images whatsoever.

The idolatrous mentality comes into operation whenever and wherever human beings reject God's great revelation of Himself and create their own alternative form of religion. The first chapter of the book of Romans in the New Testament describes the nature of idolatry with great power. This is what we read in Romans 1:18-23:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.

You can see from that description of the idol-making process that it is rooted in a rebellion against God and a rejection of His revelation. If people were doing that when the Bible was written, they are doing exactly the same today. Romans 1 deplores the fact that thousands of people who were able to see clearly

the evidences of God's power and divinity in the world around them rejected God, and instead of worshiping Him, they made images designed to take His place. The images they worshiped expressed their rejection of the true God and their desire to flee from Him and go their own way.

But if we can see similarities between the process of idol making in Bible times and the same process today, we can see similarities even more clearly when we compare the results of the rejection of God in that age and the results of this rejection in our day. The first chapter of the book of Romans describes a process of social degeneration that resulted from the false religion of the first century which is astonishingly similar to what is happening now before our eyes. Listen to this description of a plunge into sensualism which could be taken right out of today's newspaper—this too is from Romans 1:

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error (vv. 24-28).

The book of Romans then presents us with a description of the massive deterioration in society that resulted from the degeneration of those who had become idol worshippers. This is how the first chapter of Romans concludes:

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers,

haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them (vv. 28-32).

Now that is an absolutely ugly description of what happens to human life when people get involved in idol worship. Yes, it is. But it is a description of human life that is entirely accurate in terms of what is happening in our own society right now. Romans 1 depicts unnatural sexual perversion as the inevitable result of an idolatrous life. If that is so, the evidence of rebellious, idolatrous life-style is everywhere today. Any one of us can go into a legitimate bookstore and find books that depict with photographs unnatural sexual acts, presenting them as reasonable and attractive.

It is in fact the sex-drenched character of our society which is perhaps the primary evidence that our society today is as idolatrous as human society has ever been. I don't mean that this is the only expression of idolatry; I am saying that it is primary evidence that man has sold out to idols all along the line.

It is possible to identify the impact of an idolatrous mentality in every sector of our social life. Education is an example which lies close at hand. What about education these days? Isn't it a massive refusal to acknowledge the great evidence of the power and divinity of God as these are displayed in creation? Common, general, public education these days is conducted on the premise that it is possible to acquire useful knowledge about our world and about ourselves without paying any attention to God and His Word, and it is possible to do all this while assuming that human beings themselves are nothing more than a part of the animal kingdom. The educational system that results from this perverse rejection of God's speech is in fact an idolatry, for it is an attempt to create a substitute knowledge of man and his world and a substitute explanation for all reality.

One could analyze the judicial system in the same way, and the manner in which we have organized economic life also expresses an idolatrous world view. The idolatrous mentality is all around us, and it has captured the great means of communication which mold people so totally these days. Magazines, newspapers, radio, and television, in the nature of the case, represent this point of view most of the time. We can be thankful that it is possible for Christians to use the airwaves and the print media to contradict the massive idolatrous culture that is found everywhere, but proportionately the idolatrous mentality has the upper hand.

And it is, as I have said, the sexual perversity which is exhibit number one if one is looking for evidence that our world is awash in idolatry. Everywhere one turns, his eyes are overcome with pictures that are related to the sexual element of our lives. An idolatrous society always turns to the idolizing of the sensate, the idolatry of sensation. The land of Canaan was full of religious prostitution, and when the people of Israel themselves became ensnared in the filth of that land, their rejection of God is described in the Bible as prostitution and adultery. People who worship worthless idols, says the Bible, finally become worthless themselves, and their worthlessness comes to its most characteristic expression in sexual excesses and in expressions that violate human personality and bring dishonor to the institution of marriage.

So it is that we who are adults are continuously bombarded with mightily effective temptation, and if we are interested in preserving a minimum of purity we have a big job on our hands. But if the difficulties adults experience in this sex-mad culture are impressive, think what is happening to our children who are confronted with unhealthy sex from their earliest years. Children these days have nowhere to flee for protection, and what is worse, many of them are not particularly interested in fleeing, anyway. The idolatrous point of view boldly invades our schools, our homes, and even our churches. In some cases even those who have had the benefit of exposure to Christian teaching have become totally

confused. Everywhere we turn we see evidence of the damage our idolatrous way of life is causing; there are casualties all over.

It is into this situation that the simple advice—no, the command—of God comes with stunning forcefulness: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” We must think about this as we enter another year which will most likely be another year of the same. There is no reason to think that the swirling flood of idolatry will begin to ebb; it will not. And in the face of it we are helpless little children indeed—not just our teenagers, but we, their grey-haired parents, as well. Little children, the only way to escape the psychological and spiritual ruin which the idols bring is to depend entirely on the equipment God provides His people.

The command, “Keep yourselves from idols,” follows a brief statement which summarizes all that God has done so that those who believe in Him can resist the attacks of the enemy in this age. This is what comes just before the command we are considering:

We know that any one born of God does not sin, but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.

We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one.

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols (1 John 5:18-21).

The Bible here talks about being born of God—this is necessary if one is going to resist the power of the idols. It is impossible to resist the mighty power of the idols in our own strength. This means that those who are earnestly interested in resisting the power of the idols must turn to God and ask for the power of His Holy Spirit. Those who are already in the grip of the idols, possibly regularly indulging their sexual desires in gross and immoral ways, can be rescued from this damaging way of death only when God comes into their hearts and changes them. Every-

thing in the Bible indicates that those who sincerely want this renewal and who sincerely ask God for it will receive it. Of course, they will never receive it so long as they continue to go to the same places they have always gone and to read the same degenerate magazines and books they have always read; they will have to live with the people of God.

And the material we just read turns our attention entirely to the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who has come to give us understanding in the place of the confusion that is found everywhere, and He is the one who has come to draw us close to the true God. Jesus is the key person in all of this. We can escape the idols of this world only if Jesus Christ is the center of our lives, only if He is the person we live with each day. Those who know the Lord Jesus Christ cannot endure the idolatrous world they live in; and they do all they can to resist it in their own experience. Often God uses such people to blunt the force of the idolatrous world view and to create pockets of resistance and even of renewal.

This means that it is absolutely essential that each of us enters the unknown future as a companion of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know Him? What I mean is: Have you learned about Him from the pages of the Bible, and have you received the understanding of God which Jesus has made available? Before you can do this, it is necessary first of all that you confess your terrible sinfulness. We have talked about the idolatries of our time—these idolatries are not something outside us; they have found their insidious way within our own lives. Our ways of looking at ourselves and our world have been infected with this poison, our families have been damaged by the idolatrous world view, and our social relationships have been twisted into grotesque shapes by what is so prevalent in our world. We can only live with Jesus if we admit to Him how much we have become idol worshippers ourselves.

If you have never done that, I invite you to do that now as the New Year begins. To enter the New Year without Jesus means that you will walk through the jungle which the idols rule and finally you will be

Lord, as we begin this new year, we are grateful that we may be reminded of the great resources you provide us when we try to resist the attacks of the idols. Open our eyes so that we may be entirely aware of what is going on around us; may we never assume that the great rebellion against heaven that is occurring is really innocent. May we be entirely aware of the enormity of the damage that is being caused by man's rejection of God.

Receive us now as we turn away from the idols and wait for the strengthening that is so essential if we are going to resist their power. Unite us with the Lord Jesus Christ who has given us understanding and who has revealed all that we need to know about you. Dwell within us through the power of your Holy Spirit so that we will be able to create a way of life that is truly an alternative to the idolatrous life-style that we find on every side of us.

We do not pray merely for safety, but we pray for victory and for an entire way of life in our homes, our schools, and our society which will display at every point that we have rejected the way of the idols and that we follow the truth of the living God. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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