

Sermon Notes & References

“Foolishness of Idolatry”

Isaiah 44:6-20

March 13, 2011

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^A Genesis 1:1, Deuteronomy 6:4, Matthew 12:29, Rev 1:8, 17-18

^B John 14:6, Acts 2:36, 38, 4:12

^C Genesis 1:2, Isaiah 43:9

^D Acts 19:24

^E Matthew 7:13-14

A. Introduction

1. the western world has a widely popular religion
 - a. it's a strange beast that cannot brook any criticism of itself
 - b. it's been around quite a long while, and G. K. Chesterton described its followers as 'those who hate Christianity and call their hatred an all-embracing love for all religions'
 - c. in his BreakPoint Commentary, Charles Colson, formerly of the Nixon era fame, has related many examples of its effects on the everyday lives of children and adults in the U. S., the U. K., Europe and Canada.
 - d. here is just one example he cites—{2}.
 - (A) In a Texas classroom, children were told to draw a tracing of their foot, and then put a message on the drawing. One little girl wrote 'Jesus Loves Me' on hers. What happened next shows the abysmal state of religious tolerance in America.
 - (B) As Fox news anchor John Gibson relates in his new book, 'The War on Christmas,' the child's teacher ripped the tracing off the board. 'Don't you ever do this again,' she said. The little girl burst into tears.
 - (C) When her outraged father called the school, nervous officials told the child to make another tracing. She did so – but this time, instead of scrawling 'Jesus Loves Me,' she drew a tiny cross that was so small it was almost invisible.
 - (D) This little girl had learned her lesson well. Her Christian faith was something shameful – and she should keep it to herself.
 - e. about a dozen years ago, a daughter of a family attending this church had a similar experience
 - f. the religion that led to such an attitude is the religion of tolerance; 'Tolerance-ism'
2. but 'Tolerance-ism' has some major fallacies
 - a. it should admire and tolerate every point of view, including that of intolerance; but it does not, and the intolerant nature of Biblical Christianity acts to it as does a red flag to a bull
 - b. it claims skepticism on there being any absolute truth, that it is intolerant to hold convictions of right and wrong; yet is itself convicted that tolerance is right, intolerance wrong

- c. it ignores the historical meaning of tolerance, which D. A. Carson says can be described as, 'I might disagree profoundly with your argument or point of view or perspective on some matter, but I would insist on your right to articulate and defend your point of view.'^{3}.
- d. yet, amazingly enough, there are a many nominal Christians who pursuing this religion. Recently I heard one professed Christian cleric say that she would personally encourage members of other faith groups to form prayer groups for our civil officials – of what benefit can it be to encourage prayer, which is worship, to false gods?

B. The Bible is Not Tolerant of False Worship 44:6-8

- 1. there is only one true God
 - a. we read these words last Lord's Day and we read them again this morning as an introduction to our message: 6 Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me. 7 Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; Yes, let him recount it to Me in order, From the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming And the events that are going to take place. 8 Do not tremble and do not be afraid; Have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, Or is there any other Rock? I know of none.' (Isaiah 44:6-8)
 - b. the Title God gives to Himself is intolerant, the First and the Last; in that there is no allowance for any other Deity or object of worship – from the first to the last only He IS
 - c. it is the great presumption of Scripture, "In the beginning God ..." (Genesis 1:1)
 - d. it is God's words to His people: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4), words which Jesus Himself quotes in Matthew 12:29
 - e. this theme is reiterated in Revelation 1:8, "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.'"
 - f. a few verses later these words are applied by the risen and glorified Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, to Himself: "17 When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, 18 and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades'" (Revelation 1:17-18)

2. There is only one Way to come to that One true God
 - a. only Jesus Christ, Son of God, has the keys
 - b. Philip wanted to know the way to God and Jesus made a very clear answer: ["Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.'"](#) (John 14:6)
 - c. the great commission makes it imperative that this message be unwaveringly proclaimed by God's people
 - d. it was the message of the church from the very first: ["36 Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified. ... 38 Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."](#) (Acts 2:36, 38)
 - e. and a few chapters later, to the Sanhedrin, ["And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."](#) (Acts 4:12)
 - f. in the matter of salvation, the Bible is intolerant, and if I were to preach any other gospel, I would be a false witness.
 - g. the foolishness of idolatry – in any form – bears out this message – a message which Isaiah spoke to God's people

C. False Worship Results in Shame 44:9-11

1. this is God's warning which underlies the passage
 - a. worshipping any other god – following in any other system of faith than that give by God Himself through Jesus – can only have as its ultimate result complete and abject shame
 - b. this shames arises from the futility of such worship

2. Verse 9: ["Those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile, and their precious things are of no profit; even their own witnesses fail to see or know, so that they will be put to shame."](#)
 - a. the argument against false gods comes from the source from which those false gods have arisen: their makers – those who fashioned or formed these graven images
 - b. there is irony here: it is God who fashioned or formed man; it is God who fashioned or formed Israel – now it is man, even men of Israel, who seek themselves to fashion God
 - c. they are all of them 'futile' – the word is used to describe the earth in its formless or chaotic state in

Genesis 1:2; these idols – which are supposed to help and control our destinies – are fashioned by those who themselves are not in control of their own lives, their own destinies

- d. is it any wonder then that what they consider delectable and delightful, should prove unprofitable, worthless?
 - e. remember God's calling the witnesses for the opposition into court to dispute with himself in Isaiah 43:9?
 - (A) well here they are: unseeing and unknowing
 - (B) and as such they bring the evidence against themselves
 - (C) proving that they are false
3. Verse 10: "Who has fashioned a god or cast an idol to no profit?"
- a. the irony continues
 - b. it was not the intent of those who form some idol that it should not be profitable
 - c. Paul ran into such idol-makers in Ephesus: "For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, was bringing no little business to the craftsmen;" (Acts 19:24)
 - d. but the result is just that – it is profitless, without benefit
4. Verse 11: "Behold, all his companions will be put to shame, for the craftsmen themselves are mere men. Let them all assemble themselves, let them stand up, let them tremble, let them together be put to shame."
- a. those who follow such idols, along with those making them
 - b. and the two are often the same individuals
 - c. have shameful fate
 - d. because idols are made by mere men
 - e. men who can, at best, only make what lies in the minds of men and within the capacity of men
 - f. all these are called together before God's judgment
 - (A) told to stand up, stating their case
 - (B) and the verdict is fearful shame

D. An Illustration of the Folly of False Worship 44:12-17

1. The folly of unworthy workmanship

a. it is uncertain whether Isaiah is talking about two idols being fabricated, or about two stages in making the one

(A) many of the terms – the names of the tools and the names of the trees – are uncertain and capable of various translations

(B) the reason may be the trade secrets of idol makers – or just the difficulty in understanding old technology (this becomes apparent if you try to draw a detailed picture of the tabernacle, of Solomon’s temple, or of Ezekiel’s visionary temple simply from the verbal description given – although it was quite clear to the writer)

(C) in any case the lesson is the same: the graven image is completely dependent upon its weak maker

b. Verses 12-13a: “12 The man shapes iron into a cutting tool and does his work over the coals, fashioning it with hammers and working it with his strong arm. He also gets hungry and his strength fails; he drinks no water and becomes weary. 13a Another shapes wood, he extends a measuring line; he outlines it with red chalk. He works it with planes and outlines it with a compass, ...”

(A) no matter how carefully the workman labours, the result is but that of a man’s labour & no better than he

(B) the blacksmith has a part: of him Longfellow^{4} wrote:

Under a spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

(C) yet strong though he be, like all men he needs food and drink to sustain himself, and the god he is making provides no help to him at all

(D) the carpenter uses plain, ordinary, everyday tools

(E) and the result is a plain, ordinary, everyday god

2. There is the folly of unworthiness of form

- a. Verse 13b: "... and makes it like the form of a man, like the beauty of man, so that it may sit in a house."
- b. man worships the highest physical things that his senses can perceive – the highest being man himself (humanism is in essence the worship of man – worship of the creation in place of the Creator)
- c. but that image falls short of the image of God
- d. only Jesus Christ is the 'express image of His Person'
- e. if the image is less than divine in what it portrays, it is even less than human in its capabilities – we have already noted that it cannot see, it cannot know, and here – it cannot even move! ... it must be taken and put to sit in its place
- f. false religions are created by man, like man in their form, and exalting man, and are helpless like man to deal with the problem of sin that separates man from God

3. There is the folly of unworthy materials

- a. the pagan argument for idols is that there is a spirit in the materials from which the idol is constructed: but Isaiah turns to show that the materials are nothing special, and they are provided not by the idol maker, nor by the idol, but indeed by the true God in rain and natural growth
- b. verses 14-17: "14 Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak and raises it for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. 15 Then it becomes something for a man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image and falls down before it. 16 Half of it he burns in the fire; over this half he eats meat as he roasts a roast and is satisfied. He also warms himself and says, 'Aha! I am warm, I have seen the fire.' 17 But the rest of it he makes into a god, his graven image. He falls down before it and worships; he also prays to it and says, 'Deliver me, for you are my god.'"
- c. the actual materials are nothing special: any number of trees that are handy will equally well do the job – cedar, cypress, oak, fir, laurel or ash – any one will do
- d. the word 'half' is not to be taken as arithmetically precise, but as describing a substantial part of the tree: which he takes and uses as firewood; in which he delights, warming himself as well as baking bread and roasting meat;

- e. and then with the residue, the leftovers, he makes a god
- f. a god inferior to himself, commanding it to do what he cannot do himself, 'Deliver me' – how absurd!
- g. the man puts his worship on the same level as baking bread – it is the wooden god that should be thankful to the man for sparing it from being burnt as fuel!

E. The Blinding Effect of Sin 44:18-20

1. why does a man act in such an unreasonable fashion?
 - a. why do false religions flourish, and man avoid the true?
 - b. why, in the words of the Lord Jesus, is it true that "13b... for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. 14 For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:13-14)?
 - c. because sin has blinded man's eyes

2. Verses 18-20: "18 They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend. 19 No one recalls, nor is there knowledge or understanding to say, 'I have burned half of it in the fire and also have baked bread over its coals. I roast meat and eat it. Then I make the rest of it into an abomination, I fall down before a block of wood!' 20 He feeds on ashes; a deceived heart has turned him aside. And he cannot deliver himself, nor say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'"
 - a. a step backward & scrutiny of false religions should surely show their fallacy – but for many people it does not
 - b. as this man, praying as it were to a scrap of plywood, so are the man-made religions of this world
 - (A) layered together with 'good thoughts' & 'good deeds'
 - (B) yet not of God's authorship, but Satan's
 - (C) they are a lie and a deception and a vanity
 - (D) and deceiving the heart they will only lead to shame

F. Application

1. how does this apply to us?

- a. we may say, and quite truthfully
- b. 'I do not bow down to images, nor make idols'
- c. but there are other equally idolatrous pursuits
 - (A) Pursuit of Pleasure
 - (B) Pursuit of Possessions
 - (C) Pursuit of Position
 - (D) Pursuit of Power
 - (E) Pursuit of Pride
- d. which we will leave to another day for discussion

2. nevertheless, what is the heart of idolatry?

- a. is when you or I form something, based on our own desires and ideas, that we put in place of God
- b. and if you keep this in mind
- c. you will be able to defend your faith and yourself against every attack of Satan coming in the form of false religion
- d. and for this, we intently seek the guidance of God Himself

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ASV	American Standard Version of 1901
AV	Authorized (King James) Version
ERV	The Revised Version of 1885
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NIV	New International Version © 1984 by the International Bible Society
NKJV	New King James Version © 1979 Thomas Nelson Inc., Publishers
NLT	1996 New Living Translation © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A.
PHIL	New Testament Translation © 1972 by J. B. Phillips
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2. *BreakPoint Commentary*, by Charles Colson, November 16, 2005 – Kerux illustrations 30215
3. *In An Era of 'Tolerance,' Biblical Error Still Must Be Confronted*, by Jeff Robinson – Kerux illustrations 22289
4. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882