

Biblical Theology Core Seminar Class 9: The Story of Idolatry

Introduction

Idolatry strikes the modern mind as odd or even downright incomprehensible. We tend to associate it with ancient religions and cults. Stories and mythologies. But the realities of idolatry are not far removed from our culture.

Tim Keller notes: *“Our contemporary society is not fundamentally different from these ancient ones. Each culture is dominated by its own set of idols. Each has its “priesthoods,” its totems and rituals. Each one has its shrines--whether office towers, spas and gyms, studios, or stadiums--where sacrifices must be made in order to procure the blessings of the good life and ward off disaster. What are the gods of beauty, power, money, and achievement but these same things that have assumed mythic proportions in our individual lives and in our society? We may not physically kneel before the statue of Aphrodite, but many young women are driven into depression and eating disorders by an obsessive concern over their body image. We may not actually burn incense to Artemis, but when money and career are raised to cosmic proportions, we perform a kind of child sacrifice, neglecting family and community to achieve a higher place in business and gain more wealth and prestige.”* (Counterfeit Gods, p.xiv)

But there are no gods who represent these things; there is only the true God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. He alone is the true God to be given praise and worship by humanity. But humanity doesn't worship him completely.

The storyline of the Bible has a lot to say about the worship of God and of misdirected worship or idolatry.

Because I want to be extremely clear about what we mean by idolatry. Idolatry is worshipping anything other than God, visible or invisible. This means idolatry can be both external and internal.

Keller puts it like this: *“An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”*(CG, p.xx)

Or as Greg Beale puts it, idolatry is *“To commit ourselves to some part of the creation more than to the Creator.”* (We Become What We Worship, p.307)

So let's look at the story of idolatry, and then we will unpack a little at the end what this means for us.

Isaiah's Judgment (Is 6:9-13)

Take a Bible and turn with me to a well know passage in Isaiah's prophecy, Isaiah 6. This isn't the beginning of the story but is kind of the lynchpin for how we look back and forward at the story of idolatry.

Let's read a couple verses together.

⁸ *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."* ⁹ *And he said, "Go, and say to this people:*

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'

¹⁰ *Make the heart of this people dull,*
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed."

¹¹ *Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"*
And he said:

"Until cities lie waste
without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is a desolate waste,
¹² *and the LORD removes people far away,*
and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

¹³ *And though a tenth remain in it,*
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak,
whose stump remains
when it is felled."

The holy seed is its stump.
Isaiah 6:8–13 (ESV)

Isaiah is being commissioned to pronouncement judgment to Israel. Why the judgment? It is because of their idolatry. Idolatry is one of Israel's major sins described in Isaiah 1-5 (e.g. 2:8; 2:18-19; 2:20). Then in chapter 6 the first couple verse we see this famous praise for God's holiness (vv.1-4); then Isaiah is declared forgiven by God (vv.5-7); then Isaiah is commissioned to deafen and blind Israel to God's word (vv.8-10); then finally the effects of this judgment (vv.11-13). We are left wondering why God would have Isaiah do this? Why have him proclaim a message that will harden their hearts. This is certainly hard to understand. But key to understanding this is to note where we are in the biblical storyline. Israel has sinned and sinned and sinned and sinned and finally God was pronouncing a verdict of "guilty" on the nation. We know God is perfectly holy. And now he is judging Israel for their sin of idolatry.

Yeah, but idolatry is not mentioned. Yes, but the concept is there. Look at the language used: Isaiah is to preach to the people that they are to keep on hearing but not to understand. They are to keep on seeing but not perceive. This language is not new, being “blind and deaf” refer to idol worship all throughout Scripture.

Isaiah gets very specific in chapter 42: *“¹⁷ They are turned back and utterly put to shame, who trust in carved idols, who say to metal images, “You are our gods.” ¹⁸ Hear, you deaf, and look, you blind, that you may see! ¹⁹ Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD? ²⁰ He sees many things, but does not observe them; his ears are open, but he does not hear.”* Isaiah 42:17–20 (ESV)

Or Isaiah 43:8, 10: *“Bring out the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears!...Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.”*

Or Isaiah 44:8-19: *“⁸ Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.” ⁹ All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. ¹⁰ Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? ¹¹ Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame, and the craftsmen are only human. Let them all assemble, let them stand forth. They shall be terrified; they shall be put to shame together. ¹² The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it with hammers and works it with his strong arm. He becomes hungry, and his strength fails; he drinks no water and is faint. ¹³ The carpenter stretches a line; he marks it out with a pencil. He shapes it with planes and marks it with a compass. He shapes it into the figure of a man, with the beauty of a man, to dwell in a house. ¹⁴ He cuts down cedars, or he chooses a cypress tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest. He plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it. ¹⁵ Then it becomes fuel for a man. He takes a part of it and warms himself; he kindles a fire and bakes bread. Also he makes a god and worships it; he makes it an idol and falls down before it. ¹⁶ Half of it he burns in the fire. Over the half he eats meat; he roasts it and is satisfied. Also he warms himself and says, “Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!” ¹⁷ And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol, and falls down to it and worships it. He prays to it and says, “Deliver me, for you are my god!” ¹⁸ They know not, nor do they discern, for he has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see, and their hearts, so that they cannot understand. ¹⁹ No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals; I roasted meat and have eaten. And shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?”* Isaiah 44:8–19 (ESV)

Isaiah is making clear a crucial point in the story: Idol worshippers do not have spiritual eyes, even though they have physical eyes. Even though they have physical ears, they do not spiritually hear. Why is this is case? Look at Psalm 115 (c.f. Psalm 135:15-18). *“⁴ Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵ They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶ They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷ They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a*

sound in their throat. 8 Those who make them become like them; so do all who trust in them.” Psalm 115:4–8 (ESV)

And a key principle in the story is developing: If we worship idols, we will become like the idols, and their likeness will ruin us. This is what Isaiah is to pronounce to Israel: “Israel you like to worship idols instead of the one true holy God. Ok. Your judgment is that I will make you as spiritually inanimate and spiritually insensitive and lifeless as the idols you worship. You will have eyes but not see. You will have ears but not hear.”

Greg Beale: “So in verse 9, through Isaiah, God commands the idolatrous people to become like the idols they have refused to stop loving. In verse 10, he commands Isaiah to make the people like their idols through his prophetic preaching. This is a paramount example of the *lex talionis* notion of the Old Testament—an eye for an eye. People are punished by means of their own sin.” (Beale, p.47)

This isn’t the beginning of the story though. We have plopped right in the middle. Let’s roll back the game film a little bit to see how we got here. That means going to the first major idol-worshipping event in the life of Israel. Can anyone tell me what that was?

The Golden Calf – Exodus 32

The judgment of God on Israel by the prophet Isaiah didn’t come out of the blue. As I mentioned, there was decades of idolatry by the people and their leaders that lead to this. In fact early on in the history of God’s people, idolatry happens very quickly. Israel is fresh out of their bondage in Egypt. Chapters 1-14 tell of this great salvation event. In Chapters 19-20, God lays out for Israel what it means for them to be his people. They are to reflect to the world his glory and who he is. To make it clear he gives them laws and the first two of these reflect that he alone is the God to be worshipped. Why? He saved them. Then to make it clearer to his people about how they are to worship him, he says that they aren’t about making images or statues or other things.

It doesn’t take long before they engage in the very thing God prohibited. It seems from the account that they thought they were honestly worshipping YHWH, but they were worshipping him the way they saw him. They created an idol or image out of their liking and desires. And what happened? Israel came to be described by what they worshipped. God calls them a stiff-necked people (Ex. 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut. 9:6, 13; 10:16; 31:27). This is an odd phrase, but it has a very ironic meaning. Stiff-necked is a phrase to describe Israel is portrayed mockingly as rebellious cattle because they were worshipping a calf and thus become like it. Just like a stubborn cow that refuses to go in the right direction, idolatrous Israel is “stiff-necked.”

Beale notes: “The first generation Israelites did not literally become petrified gold calves like the golden calf they worshiped, but they are depicted as acting like out-of-control and headstrong calves apparently because they are being mocked as having become identified with the spiritually rebellious image of the calf that they had worshiped. What they had revered, they had come to resemble, and that resemblance was destroying them.” (Beale, p.82)

So we started our story with a prophet of later Israel who was pronouncing judgment on the people for their idolatry. He says that they have ears but don't hear, eyes but don't see. They have become like the idol they worshipped. But as we went back to the defining event in the first generation of Israel in the Exodus, we see the pattern as well. The people revered a calf of gold, and they became a stiff-necked people.

As we know, and have seen in other theme classes, the story of Israel doesn't progress well on this point. Idolatry will be a major struggle for the nation as they move into the land, and deal with surrounding nations. Their later kings would be judged on how they worshipped God. Did the nation reflect God and his glory rightly by worshipping him in the prescribed way, free of "creaturely images?" No.

Psalm 106:19–20: ¹⁹ *They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image.* ²⁰ *They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.*

2 Kings 17:14–15:¹⁴ *But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God.* ¹⁵ *They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them.* (cf. 1 Kings 12:25-33)

Hosea 4:7: ⁷ *The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame.* (cf. Hosea 4:16-17)

Jeremiah 2:5, 11: ⁵ *Thus says the Lord: "What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?...¹¹ Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.*

This one event, would define Israel's existence. When Israel turned to worship idols, they would become stubborn, empty vain and lifeless just like those very idols. And this was their undoing. This Golden Calf event is not the beginning of the story though. Before we go forward, let's go all the way to the beginning

Created to Reflect (Gen 1-2)

I am not going to rehearse a lot here, because we have seen this again and again in previous stories. Humanity was created as reflective beings. God created us in his image, in his likeness and was to rule as God's vice-regent over his creation and multiply to spread the divine image across the earth. Humanity means that we were created to reflect His character, His attributes and His glory. That means our humanity is wrapped up in who God. To be human is to worship him, or to put it another way to be human is to reflect his glory and his image. "All humans have been created to be reflecting beings, and they will reflect whatever they are ultimately committed to, whether the true God or some of object of the created order." (Beale, p.22).

Instead of obeying the command of God in Gen 1:27ff to bring God's glory to the end of the earth, Adam chose to expand his own glory (cf. Ezekiel 28). He committed self-worship. Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden was ultimately tied to idolatry, that is, Adam became committed to something other than God: "When Adam stopped being committed to God and reflecting his image, he revered something else in place of God and resembled his new object of worship. Thus at the heart of Adam's sin was turning from God and replacing reverence for God with a new object of reverence to which Adam became conformed." (Beale, p.127)

Because he became an idolater Adam was unable to fulfill his divine mission and mandate to rule and subdue the creation: "As an image-bearer Adam was to reflect the character of God, which included mirroring the divine glory. Just as Adam's son was in Adam's 'likeness' and 'image' (Gen. 5:1-3) and was to resemble his human father in appearance and character, so Adam was a son of God who was to reflect his Father's image. This means that the command for Adam to subdue, rule and fill the earth includes uppermost that he is a king filling the earth, not merely with progeny, but image-bearing progeny who will reflect God's glory." (Beale, p.131)

And so we have at the very beginning again this idea that what you revere, you reflect and it will lead to your ruin or restoration. Adam was ruined by his worship. Israel is ruined by their worship.

Bridging the Gap

I highlighted at the beginning that most people do not bow down to physical idols and worship today, as we bridge the gap from Old Testament to New Testament, what we see is a bridge as well. There certainly is still idol worship, but it takes on a new flavor.

In each of the Gospels (Mt 13:13-15; Mk 4:12; Lk 8:10; Jn 12:39-40), Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9,10. In doing so he, like Isaiah is pronouncing a judgment on the Israel of his time. Now the Israel in Jesus time wasn't still bowing down to calves made of gold, but were bowing down to their traditions. This was their object of worship.

Tool Alert: typology helps us understand this better. The unbelief and judgment of Israel in Isaiah's day was a foreshadowing of a pattern that anticipated a greater unbelief and judgment in Jesus' day.

The pattern was being repeated, but what's at stake is so much greater. In Jesus' time, the Israelites were rejecting the Word of God in the flesh. Just as Israel then was becoming like what they worshiped, stubborn and spiritually lifeless; having eyes and not seeing, ears but not hearing. The same was happening now. They were becoming as spiritually dead as their man-made traditions and rituals. Their tradition was but whitewash. Remember these words of Jesus:

²⁷ *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all*

uncleanness. ²⁸ *So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Matthew 23:27–28*

They had become what they worshipped to their ruin. And they committed the ultimate act of false worship to the false god of man-made traditions, by murdering the God-man Jesus. In revering their idols, they killed the “image of the invisible God.” (Col 1:15)

[Lest you think this is all ruin. Remember at the beginning I mentioned that what you worship you become like either for ruin or restoration. In John 12, Jesus speaks of himself as light, reflecting the light of the Father. And he holds our hope of restoration for those who would believe in him. Those who believe in him will reflect him, not for ruin, but restoration!]

Paul

The story doesn't stop there, because idolatry isn't just an issue for Israel. The beginning of our story shows us this. All humanity is to reflect and worship God. Paul in Romans 1:18-28, powerfully demonstrates that idolatry leads to a malfunction of one's relationship to God and this always leads to a malfunction of one's relationships with other humans.

Paul doesn't leave the Romans with just a picture of how wrong worship harms, but in his well-known verses in Chapter 12 he presents the antithesis to Romans 1. The chart in the handout displays this:

Romans 1:18-28	Romans 12:1-2
Wrath Refusing to glorify or thank God Dishonoring the body Misunderstood, idolatrous service of worship Reprobate mind Rejecting the righteousness of God	Mercy Sacrificing to God Offering the body Reasonable service of worship Renewed mind Approving the will of God

Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, taps into the Old Testament to tell the Corinthians the truth that we have seen in this story: idolaters will be identified with the same dead spiritual nature as the idols to which they passionately commit themselves.

Revelation

Our story ends in Revelation. Here we see again that you resemble what you revere. In Revelation 13, those who worship idols are referred to as “earth dwellers” (Rev. 8:13; 13:8, 14; 14:6-9; 17:2, 8). According to Beale, the “earth dwellers” in Revelation “cannot look beyond this earth for their security, which means that they trust in some part of the creation instead of the Creator for their ultimate welfare. Thus people are called ‘earth dwellers’ because this expresses the object of their trust and perhaps of their very being, in that they have become part of the earthly system in which they find security—

they have become like it. Because they commit themselves to some aspect of the earth, they become earthy and come to be known as ‘earth dwellers.’” (Beale, p.255)

Idolaters to Glory-reflectors

As we have gone through this story one thing is looming over the overarching story. If we resemble what we revere for ruin, how do we reverse this? How can people who have ears but don't hear, and eyes but don't see?

To begin to answer this we need to return to Isaiah 6. There we see Isaiah being cleansed by God, made holy and a reflector of his glory. Chapters later, though the judgment on Israel seems to be coming, there are glimpses of reversal. Isaiah 29:9–16, 18: ⁹ *Astonish yourselves and be astonished; blind yourselves and be blind! Be drunk, but not with wine; stagger, but not with strong drink!* ¹⁰ *For the Lord has poured out upon you a spirit of deep sleep, and has closed your eyes (the prophets), and covered your heads (the seers).* ¹¹ *And the vision of all this has become to you like the words of a book that is sealed. When men give it to one who can read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot, for it is sealed.”* ¹² *And when they give the book to one who cannot read, saying, “Read this,” he says, “I cannot read.”* ¹³ *And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,* ¹⁴ *therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”* ¹⁵ *Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?”* ¹⁶ *You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, “He did not make me”; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, “He has no understanding”?* ... ¹⁸ *In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.*

Isaiah 32:1, 3-4

¹ *Behold, a king will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule in justice....* ³ *Then the eyes of those who see will not be closed, and the ears of those who hear will give attention.* ⁴ *The heart of the hasty will understand and know, and the tongue of the stammerers will hasten to speak distinctly.*

Isaiah 52:15:¹⁵ *so shall he sprinkle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.* (cf. 52:8, 10; 66:8,14)

God would bring some out from the people of Israel and some from the nations and reverse their idolatry.

In the Gospel of Matthew we looked at, right after Jesus pronouncement of judgment on the blindness and deafness of Israel in his day, he gives hope to some, God was in the coming of his Son was opening eyes and ears. Matthew 13:16: ¹⁶ *But blessed are your*

eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. God is the only giver of spiritual sight and spiritual hearing.

While we have seen that idolaters fail to understand like their idols, they also are blaspheming God's character in their idolatry, they are saying that he has no understanding. But God is the one who made man in his image. He is the potter, we the clay. He is the only one who can reimage those idolaters. Isaiah and Ezekiel spoke of this future reversal.

"It is in Christ that people, formerly conformed to the world's image (Rom. 1:18-32), begin to be transformed into God's image (Rom 8:28-30; 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; 4:4)... This process of transformation into the divine image will be completed at the end of history, when Christians will be resurrected and fully reflect God's image in Christ (1 Cor 15:45-54; Phil 3:20-21). They will be resurrected by the Spirit-imparting power of the risen Christ. Since it was the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 1:4), so the Spirit of Christ will raise Christians from the dead at the end of the age... The Spirit's work in people will enable them to be restored and revere the Lord and resemble his image, so that God will be glorified in and through them." (Beale, p.282)

So What?

This is the story of idolatry, and of its reversal. Our main idea has been that you become what you worship either for ruin or restoration. We were made to be reflecting beings, look at how young children mimic their parents. Or how people desperately try to mimic a celebrity. The reality is people will either reflect God and aspects of his character, or they will reflect something else in this world. We as Christians have the message that turns idolaters into worshippers of God. We were once dead and spiritually lifeless. By the Gospel, God gives eyes and ears and hearts, ready to worship him. [Eustace Scrubb, Dawn Treader, p.108-110]

There is no neutrality in your worship of God. You either revere him or you don't. You either reflect him and his glory, or you "exchange" it for something that he has created. The question you need to ask is who are you worshipping? Beale: "All of us are imitators...We are either being conformed to an idol of the world or to God. Some might think it is possible to exist in a mode of spiritual neutrality in their Christian lives. Some Christians might think that they can go for extended periods of time not reading their Bibles or praying or attending church and having fellowship with other believers. When God's people think this way and act accordingly, in reality, they become subtly conformed to the world instead of to God."

This is why Paul's encouragement in 1 Cor 4 and 1 Cor 11 to imitate him as he imitates Christ is important. Within the local church, through our discipling, we should be imitating and imaging one another as we image and imitate Christ.