

Faithful Resistance

Philippians 3:17-21, Romans 1:21-23, 1 John 5:20-21

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We are in the fourth sermon in our series for the fall called Gospel GPS, the pathway for spiritual formation. And in this fourth sermon, we consider questions such as how does the gospel direct and teach us how to live and go deeper into what it means to be a disciple of Christ? Or said another way, how is our character formed? How are our convictions built up? How are our minds challenged? All of those things where we do not stop plateauing. If you are a professing Christian, it's very easy just to plateau with the knowledge that you have. But God desires for us to go deeper into what it means to trust in Christ.

In this series, that means we are purposefully pressing in on the ways in which the scriptures want to open up the very crevices of our hearts to see that things are not always so pretty, and that things are quite messy. And He desires that we have greater dependence on who He is that we might be more dependent on Christ and on His grace, and that we would grow into maturity. This was Paul's main concern, that the church of Jesus Christ would be presented as mature in Christ. And this growth and maturity means that we have to have some uncomfortable conversations from the word.

And this is just one of those conversations. It's not that the others have been easy, but this one particularly, I don't know how I could ever prepare for this and not spend a whole lot of time in deep repentance. It's calling us to faithful resistance, but resistance against something that is from the beginning to the end of scripture a poisonous toxin in the system of humanity. And the church of Jesus Christ is not immune. That toxin, that poison, is idolatry. To be formed in Christ is to have a faithful resistance against idolatry.

This morning as we work through what the Lord has to say to us, we're going to look at three sections of scripture. Two are from Paul. One is from John. But they are giving us a very big subject in small ways which is on the mind and heart of Paul, the mind of John, on Jesus, and on God Himself.

Hear now God's word as He calls us to faithful repentance to know and to see and to discern the idols in our midst. Romans 1:21-23.

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 foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. [ESV]

Then in a more personal way in the book of Philippians in the third chapter, Paul is writing to that church encouraging them to imitate one another as they follow Christ to imitate Him. But he's also in tears because of his concern of what's happened in the midst of the church. Hear now Philippians 3:17-21.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. [ESV]

And then finally from the pen of John, this is how he ends his first letter. We might imagine just as with the introduction that we must always pay attention to the ending. What is most at the heart of the writer? Here's what John concludes.

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourselves from idols. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that through your word as it is given to us in these passages but also as they are connected to the very large theme on your heart for your people and for humanity in general which is the reality of the idol factory of our own hearts. Lord, help us to hear. Help us to unmask them. Help us to discern what idols might be playing out in our imaginations and our hearts, even formed by our hands. But Lord, call us and equip us to resist. Help us, Lord. And by your Spirit lead us to honor you as our heavenly Father, Jesus as the savior, and the Holy Spirit, the triune God as the one who is all glory and receives and is due all of our worship. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

This morning, what I want to do is walk through these three passages, and I also want to show their connectedness to the larger theme of idolatry, as I said earlier, from beginning to the end of the scriptures themselves. And in so doing, what I want you to see is that these passages help us to understand what faithful resistance looks like. And there are three things. I've asked the team to keep the outline up through the whole sermon so that you can easily follow along. The first is unmasking idolatry. The second is discerning our idols. And the third is resisting idolatry. It's unmasking, discerning, resisting as these passages take us to a deep place in the heart of our imagination as human being.

First is unmasking of idolatry. This is Paul's desire. Remember, he's writing to a group of Christians. He's writing to the church because his concern not only in Philippians but also in Corinthians where he's incredibly concerned about the reality of idolatry at work in the church. And here at the beginning of Romans 1, oftentimes what I've seen used as a blunt instrument to beat up the world is in fact a letter to the church. And his concern is that they understand what idolatry looks like. The first thing he does is he reminds us that at its very heart, idolatry is itself a distortion.

Notice what he says. "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 foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools." This is very similar language that Paul will use in his letter to the Corinthians as he says of them, your knowledge has puffed you up. What's being puffed up begins at the problem of distorting who God is in His character, in His purpose, and in His will. He says, "For although they knew God." They knew He existed. They rejected that existence, did not honor Him as the creator, nor did they give thanks. Instead, they turned to themselves.

Notice what happens. It doesn't begin with turning to themselves. It begins by distorting. Is this who God really is? I am not interested in that God. This is deeply connected all the way to the beginning of the scriptures themselves in Genesis 3. I would suggest as Dr. Bruce Ellis Benson at Wheaton College wrote several years ago. The reality is this. We'll use this as an example thinking of idolatry. It's like a fern. I make a fern. I get on my knees, and I worship the fern. That's what we think of as idolatry, but that is not how idolatry is first introduced in scripture. It is something far more pernicious and toxic. It is conceptual idolatry which is really at the heart.

It is the conceptual idolatry that's introduced to us at the beginning of Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve are tempted. What's interesting is it is Satan himself who does not need to create the idolatry in the heart of the human. He merely needs to give the taste of idolatry. For when he says did God really say? He doesn't want you to eat of the tree because then you will be like Him. Satan distorts the character of

God as if God is in competition with us, and He doesn't want us to be like Him. It was precisely that particular introduction of a distortion of God that then hits the fuel of the human heart as the idol making factory. And there, it would be the fruit seemed delightful. Well, what's the fruit? The fruit is that God is really out for His own ends, not for me. I don't need His restrictions. I want to experience limitlessness.

Idolatry at its heart actually begins at the concept that God really isn't who He says He is. And the distortion is that God is just holding us down. And then we're off to the races because it doesn't end with a distortion of God's character. It is always wedded to an inflation of who we are. Notice what Paul says. "Claiming to be wise, they became fools," only after they've distorted the reality and nature of who God is. I love this futility which gives us the picture that they are busy in their thinking. They're staying up all hours of the night trying to figure out and transcend the thing which we most want to escape. We know we are limited. We know we have boundaries. But when we're honest, we don't like them very much, and we want to transcend them. We become futile.

When Paul says here, "Their foolish hearts were darkened," this is precisely the issue he with which he was dealing with the Corinthians. They were so puffed up in their own ability because their knowledge was for themselves in hopes that they might find a secret knowledge, a way through their felt limitations to transcend the limits and say, no, I don't need that God. I want this. And so it's an extension and an inflation of self.

As the Dutch theologian Gerhard von Rad once wrote, "The serpent's insinuation is the possibility of an extension of human existence beyond the limits set by God at creation." We want to be able to have an intellectual enrichment that has a power over and an understanding of the mysteries that lie beyond man. We feel those limitations. And when we're honest, we don't like them. We want what we want when we want it.

But it doesn't begin by getting on our knees and worshipping a created thing. It actually begins in the deep crevices of our hearts. I want that. And it begins with distortion of who God is.

What is interesting is Paul then says they "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." Now, I recognize at the end of verse 23 that he does talk about physical things that are created. But it's so easy for us as advanced on in human life as we are to think of ourselves as somehow graduating from such unintellectual pursuits as creating things which we worship or creating things which we believe we are in debt to for helping us in life. We have advanced beyond that, right? But the reality we all know is that we create things all the time to which we are indebted, that gives us a sense of identity, a sense of meaning, a sense of rest and peace. While we may not get on our knees and worship it, when we find it threatened, we become so angry very quickly. We think we've advanced ourselves beyond the creating of graven images and worshipping such images, but our lives are full of debts and full of created things which we worship in hopes that we can go beyond our felt limits.

But Paul doesn't mean to just unmask our idolatry as distortion and inflation of self. He also calls us to discern our idols. In Philippians 3, Paul is encouraging the body of Christ to remember, if you see anything in me that is praiseworthy and looking like Christ, follow me. Imitate my way. In fact, imitate others that you see following in the way of Christ. But Paul was in tears because he was concerned because what was perhaps happening is that people who were once claiming faith, that faith was now being overshadowed by idolatry squeezing out the gospel. In fact, it was not the gospel or faith at all. He tells them, "Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

Please understand Paul is not saying that the earth is bad and that heavenly things are the greatest things. His point is not to say that created material things are bad. The problem is if we try to find our sense of worth and value in created things, our end is destruction. When he says "earthly things," what is he talking about? He's calling us to discern what kind of idolatry might be at work in our hearts.

In a recent book, pastor John Tyson talks about these two kinds of idols in broad categories. One is heart idolatry, and the other is cultural idolatry. Heart idolatry might seem a little bit more familiar to us when we consider, as he says, heart idols "are things that we elevate to pseudo divinity in our hearts." For example, it's the kinds of things that we imagine in our hearts and invest with a pseudo divinity, a power that will deliver us and save us. It could be all forms of lust. It could be all forms of addictions. It could be a desire for fitness to stretch beyond our limitations of age and pain and worth.

I've felt that. I turned 50 this year. I don't know what happened, but before June 10th, I could bike ride hundreds of miles and not have a twinge of pain. But I'll be doggone that after that, I am now nursing tendons that I didn't even know existed. I know you're probably saying, oh, poor thing. But that just tells you I wasn't accustomed to that limit. Now, I have people in the congregation asking are you rolling it out? Are you doing your stretches? I lived to avoid stretching.

The whole point is you bet there was a sense in which I realized how easy my own fitness can become a form of a heart idol. I'm running after it to run away from the limitations that I feel so keenly. It could be a relationship where you feel you don't have a sense of worth unless you have someone on your arm. It could be a desire for independence, that you don't need others, and you can provide for yourself. Thank you very much. As John Calvin once said, and I paraphrase, the human heart is the idol factory.

But there are also cultural idols. Cultural idols are things the world values that seize our affection and devotion. Here, what we have is human hearts. Those who are called to follow Christ are those who are the called-out ones, the church. We are called to live in the world as the called-out ones. But the problem is living in the world means our human hearts which are idol factories come into a whole arena and all different kinds of subcultures of idols. Some have symbols, and some don't. If you don't believe me, go into a Baltimore Ravens game one day when we're back in full stadiums. Walk in wearing a full Steelers uniform and see how well it goes with you. We have all kinds of little subcultures. As a southerner, it is the pride of many southern families, many times more than the Catechism, that you bet our children will know what college teams we support.

And you can do what I do. Maybe you already do this. Maybe you're weird like me. I like to actually watch the television completely on mute just to watch the commercials. Without the words, you see all kinds of images.

Notice what Paul says here. "Their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame." Last night, I did just this in preparation for today. I actually recorded it and went back and watched it. It was two commercials. One was these two hands come out of nowhere onto the screen, and in the middle of the screen it says, "Identity. Home. Auto. Vacation. You're in good hands with Allstate." On the one hand, insurance makes a lot of sense. But if we think that hands appearing out of nowhere saying, "You're in good hands, Allstate," what are we being invited to do? Protect and hedge yourself against the inevitable silver bullet around the corner that might take away your valuables. But we're there. Allstate. On the one hand, yes, it makes sense. But on the other hand, we must understand what's happening underneath. It is appealing to our fears, our anxieties, and our desire to hang onto our stuff. We want it to be there when we're ready to retire.

Then there's the next commercial. I'm not sure, but I think it's called the Baconator. I have no idea what this thing is. It just involves garlic, cheese, a burger, and a bun. And it looks disgusting. But I will tell you that as a photographer, I've taken courses on production-level commercial food photography. And I will tell you that they know exactly what they're doing. If you turn off the sound, that burger's being presented to you from below, up above, all around, really close. And then when you learn what they're actually doing to that food, it's disgusting. But the whole desire is to woo you and me to make sure our bellies are full.

Now, you might say a Baconator is for unhealthy people. But the truth is the temptation isn't overeating. The whole focus is on eating. Half skim triple mocha latte. It's the overemphasis on food everywhere we turn. And they're using millions of dollars to entice us.

Let me go further. I think one of the biggest dangers that Paul was concerned about with the church at Philippi is that that would forget that their citizenship was in heaven and not in the earthly kingdom. He was concerned to the point of tears that there were those who were taking their faith and wedding it to cultural idolatry and where you couldn't tell the difference. And this is the challenge even for us today because when we begin to confuse our faith with lifestyle, we are in grave danger. What do I mean? Lifestyle choices become confused with faith commitments. And when we feel that our lifestyle is being threatened, we think our faith is being threatened, and then, therefore, we're being persecuted.

Here is an example. Nowhere in scripture do we ever hear it's commanded to have a democratic free republic. Now, I love living in a democratic free republic. But it has nothing to do with the reality or viability of my faith because if we do so, what do we say to those who are living in communist China where the church is growing leaps and bounds? Trust me, I don't want Communism. I don't want Marxism. But you can bet how easily I begin to think that my living in a democratic free republic is a God-given right that I am given as a gift. Then, therefore, I am owed it. And when it's threatened, I think I'm being persecuted. It's happening all over the place.

Now, yes, the reality of human nature leads me to believe that I think living in freedom where we have freedom of choice is actually a great way for human beings to flourish, but it's not commanded from scripture. Our citizenship is in heaven, not on earth. No matter how much the economies of earth are upside down or right side up, the point is our faith alone is in Christ. And this whole ecosystem of cultural idols begins to threaten. Whether it's sports or politics, everything becomes a pathway for a new identity.

But what Paul tells us here is that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself." Do you hear that? He's going to take all of it and subject it to Himself. Our citizenship is in heaven. It doesn't mean that we're not active in the kingdom's below, but they are not the anchor for our faith. Christ alone is.

Not only does Paul teach us to discern our idols, but we now move to John who helps us to remember how to resist idolatry. John says here, "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." What John proclaims as a truth about who God is reminds us that we need to hear the warning of scripture. It was Paul also who said in Romans 1:18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who, by their unrighteousness, suppressed the truth."

It's only after that he says what they're doing is they're suppressing the truth through idolatry. We have only one true God. And the warning is this, and we cannot escape the words of Isaiah or Ezekiel or Paul in this reality. If we seek to unite the Christian faith with human idolatry or cultural idolatry, it is no longer Christian faith. We are no longer dependent on Christ, and we must recognize that the consequences of that sin are real, and the judgment for idolatry is coming. And he calls us to be aware of it, to flee, to keep ourselves from idols.

And I'm being really kind because I recognize we have lots of ages in here. If I were to read you some of the warnings against idolatry from scripture, they are R-rated level content. God is super wrathful about the reality of being displaced by things which we have created. And yet He invites us. Instead of falling under that wrath, God has given us a day of grace. Today is a day of grace to remind us to be renewed, to call us out from our idolatry. And He calls us to do some work.

What do I mean by work? The first thing I think He would tell us to do in terms of work is to be careful. To do the work of dealing with idols means we have to do a deeper search of our own hearts, our motives, and the words we say.

As I've been thinking about today and the work we have to do, let's think about it as a cultural idol of this community of which this church is a part. Let's think about education for our children. If we think that education for our children doesn't easily become an idol, I just remind you to flip the calendar back to the redistricting debate over the last several months of last year and the protests all along 108, the vitriolic insults given over social media if you were on one side or the other. I mean, it was brutal. I had neighbors literally avoiding contact with other neighbors. I could see it. Groups were being started. Signs were being posted at opposing neighbors for opposing candidates. It was crazy.

What that tells me is I need to pay attention to that. And when I thought about it more deeply, I recognized that oftentimes why many of us live here is because we heard that education is really good. Be it public or private or home education, it's very easy for education to become an idol.

How do we know that we're doing the work of dealing with the idolatry of our child's education? We need to be paying attention to what we say and how we motivate our children in their education. We have to be careful not to exchange dysfunctional idols for functional idols. What do I mean? We can take a dysfunctional idol, for example, Johnny is not doing well at school because he is spending too much time on Tik Tok. That's not working for him because it is dysfunctional, meaning he is spending too much time doing this other thing, and it's keeping him from getting ahead.

What we do is we like to motivate this way. I am so disappointed in your academic performance. You can do so much better. You are so much smarter than that. What we're doing subtly is we're using relational shame to motivate our children to do better in school. We're saying that's a dysfunctional idol. That's not working well for you. I'm so disappointed in you.

And isn't it amazing that God never says He's disappointed in us? Because God knows us. He knows we fail. He knows we are idol factories. But He never says, I am disappointed in you. But we use that kind of language all the time in hopes that we either motivate ourselves or we motivate somebody else. And then what we do is we say, that's a dysfunctional idol, Johnny. Let me give you another vision. Here's a functional idol. If you do well in school, you won't have to work at McDonald's. Have you seen what they pay Johnny? You will not be able to afford that apartment or that Nintendo, whatever version it will be. And let me give you a vision of your future self. And we give them the functional idol that if you do well in school, you will make good money. You will be a well upstanding individual and provide for yourself and family and hopefully our grandchildren.

Now, maybe I'm the only one. Let me pretend I'm the only one. I've used that kind of logic. I fully admit that I've taken my daughter, and I've given her this vision. Oh, I know you can do so much better. I want you to be a strong woman. I want you to make this kind of money. You're going to be great. You want that kind of car? You go, girl. And I try to give her that vision. But underneath, what in the world am I doing? I'm more concerned about her career than I am her character. I'm simply exchanging a dysfunctional idol for a functional one. But maybe I'm the only one.

Let us be careful. Consider what we are doing with our words and our motivations either for ourselves or for somebody else whether we're simply exchanging a dysfunctional idol for a functional one? That's the hard work. And it's painful. It has required some serious heart work even before I preached the first sermon at 8:30 this morning.

It's warning. It's work. But the most important destination for resisting idolatry is worship. Notice what John says. "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life." He is inviting us again to consider the one with whom we have union, who has been

given all authority in heaven and on earth, who is actually the one who in the middle of His ministry taught us to pray. And what did He say? When you pray, consider this prayer.

"Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed is your name. Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil."

Notice what Jesus is doing in that prayer is what John is doing for us in this prose. He's saying the way to really resist idolatry is through right worship and understanding, Lord, the way to challenge the idolatry in our hearts, your will be done, not mine. Your kingdom come, not mine. And this is coming from a savior who in His ministry took on human flesh, gave up the glory which was due to Him, and who would wrestle and pray this very thing, "Lord, take this cup from me," knowing that His cup would be one of wrath that we might have life and be united to Him.

But this is the part through worship and prayer. If He is the redeemer, the one who has said, "Your kingdom come; your will be done" so that we might have life also means, as Paul says, we need to take up the cross of our discipleship as well. What is good for the savior also means we go in worship. And we carry the cross, and whatever idols we've begun to bow to in our hearts need to be sacrificed. And remember that we are united to Christ Himself who is the Lord and the giver of life.

In this worship, we hear that Jesus leads us in prayer and John leads us in prose to remember that you are united to Him. And only then after he says that does he say, "Little children, keep yourself from idols." We've also sung it already this morning, and I highlighted it. And it took me until the second service to really get it but notice what we sang with such ease. "Riches, I heed not." The second time I had to sing this through, I just began to really question myself.

"Riches, I heed not." Really? "Nor man's empty praise." I don't know. Letters of encouragement are kind of nice. "Thou my inheritance now and always." Yeah, but I wonder how the stock market is doing this week. "Thou and thou only be first in my heart." As long as my wife is not mad at me and my children still love me. "High King of heaven, my treasure thou art." Yes, Lord.

But has the wisdom of your treasure led me to see that even before the fall you gave us blessed limitations that you and I actually might be able to rest in a God who has none? That actually our limits, which for sinful hearts become a springboard for idolatry, is a place where we can finally rest in Christ? And we can rest with the one who has freed us from this reality, that idols are either conceptually from the human heart or built by the human hand. And that which can be created and thought by us can also be destroyed by us. And it can be destroyed as we begin to see right worship, and the Lord would free us to find our hope in Him to destroy the idols that keep us from deeper union, deeper maturity, deeper dependence on Jesus Christ. May the Lord help us and free us for His glory. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning. We thank you for your word which reveals to us the power of idolatry and its presence not just in us but all around us. Lord, give us grace and your Spirit to find our union in Jesus Christ, that our limits are an invitation to trust, and that you are the one who is worthy of praise with whom there is no shadow of turning. You are faithful, and you have freed us from sin and death. Lord, help us to resist idolatry. Help us to discern it. Help us to unmask it. And help us, O Lord, to rely on you alone. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.