

1 John 5:21 (NKJV)

21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

Well, this is always a sermon for which I have mixed feelings. We are prepared to move away from our study on 1 John. And I think, as always, we know that our study has had an effect on us. And as always, it has not had as great an effect as we wish it did.

Remember how John started this epistle.

1 John 1:1-4 (NKJV)

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life--

2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us--

3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

We started with the facts about a historical Jesus. John was a **first hand witness** to the life and teaching of Christ. This is no masterful story made up by story tellers. John's message and beliefs are based on solid rock history and reality. His teaching is nothing like the teaching of the dreamers and philosophers and liars saying that **Jesus** and **the Christ** were separate entities.

John starts with rock solid reality for people who are skeptical. The proof can meet all their fair rational demands.

So he starts with that, and then he tells us what **his end goal is**. He tells us **why** he wrote the book.

3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

John wants these people to pick sides. And the side he wants them to pick is to **have fellowship** with those who are telling them the truth. Not because this is some kind of political party where the one with the most followers wins. It is because what John is telling them is the **only way** they can have fellowship with the Father and with Christ. It is in the reader's best interest to have fellowship.

And that is what John wants for us at Ferndale as well. He wants us to have **fellowship** with God and Christ and **each other**.

Then John next moves to tell us the **prerequisite** to fellowship and the **maintenance** of fellowship. We must be willing to confess our sin, first to ourself, and second to God, and third to those human beings we fellowship with.

And our greatest obstacle to deep fellowship with God or with other humans is our unwillingness to accept blame. Our **fellowship** will only be as deep as our willingness to accept **blame** and **responsibility** for our sin. After we have accepted the blame, then we can accurately confess. Then we can have restored fellowship with God and each other.

If your fellowship with others is not as enriching as you would like it to be, the first question you should ask is how willing are you to expose the truth about why you **say what you say** and **do what you do** to yourself, and to God, and to each other. All close fellowship starts there. And it is not a mystery. Two people who are committed to this kind of self honesty and are committed wholly to Christ, are capable of a deep abiding fellowship. I thank God for the insight that John provided to us about this.

And then John goes further to his **real end goal**.

4 And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.

John is writing to help us have a deep lasting happiness, with roots of truth that go deeper than any life situation. We discussed this several times through our study. We discussed that this joy **is** a real **happiness**, the kind of happiness people long for, even when they do not know **how to get it**. It is the kind of happiness that God has in Himself. It is the kind of happiness that lingers in the background even as we go through grief, and mourning and pains of all kinds.

And the reason that it is so **solid** and so **stable** and so **predictable** is because it is based upon **certainty**. It is based upon things that we **KNOW**. When we choose to live in unbelief, when we will not allow our world to gravitate around God's promises and His good intentions for our lives, our joy will subside. But when we allow ourselves to trust that **God loves us** and has already saved us so we can spend all eternity with Him and His family, when we allow ourselves to trust that even the pain we feel will be useful in that end result, then we can have the kind of joy that John offers us.

The Joy that John offers to us comes from the **Knowing** of the things we are told we **can know**.

And we soon know that John is talking about something that is **more** than intellectual assent, the kind of knowing the demons have. No, this knowing is

a sign that a miracle has happened to us. And this knowing always results in **signs of life**. We began talking of these things as if they are **tests** of the truth of our Christianity. But we soon moved on to describing them as signs of life. We will **believe in the Christ** as the apostles taught us about Him. He is the factual historical Jesus who demands our very lives as consequence of that belief.

We will **obey what our Lord Jesus commands of us**. We will do it gladly with the understanding that we are doing that which will ultimately make us the happiest.

And we will **love the brothers** because, well, they are family now. And if our Father loves them and we love our Father, what else could we do? And besides, Christ, whom we love, commands it.

John also taught us about the obstacles. We have an **enemy**. He leads the world's system. And that will give us trouble. But we have a solution. We have the inside information to **keep us** from falling, and we have the offer of forgiveness when we **do fall**.

We could go on and on, but I suppose we must be prepared to say a goodbye to our ongoing focus on 1 John. But it is always there in our arsenal of truths with which to **counter our opposition** and **make claims** on the truths that **provide us joy**.

This leads us to the last verse.

²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen.

The word here for little children means infants or little darlings. It is definitely a term of endearment. There is a fondness. But at the same time it is not exactly a term that would appeal to one's ego.

Have you ever watched yourself as you responded to a life situation? Maybe it is a temptation to sin. Maybe it is an attack on your ego. Maybe it is a question about something you have done wrong. Maybe it is a defense for some action you have taken. And **what you do** or **what you say** strikes you in such a way that you know you are **acting like a little kid**? Maybe throwing a fit so you can get your way. Maybe making ourselves miserable because we can't have the cookie we want. Do you know what I mean.

I sometimes wonder if I have changed significantly from the time I was a little kid. My tantrums and sneakiness have become far more complicated on the surface. But down deep I am acting similar to all my precious little kids did, and like my grandkids do, and like every kid does. From God's viewpoint we are acting like little kids. Do you ever see that about yourself?

You know what is really Good? God loves His children. Oh, it would be better that we never acted like toddlers. But from where He sits how much of our behavior must be very similar.

You know what else is really good? We **are** His children. Don't we always want to think the best of our own kids? Won't we always invest more in our kid's discipline because ultimately we know they are ours and we take responsibility?

Ultimately, if we are going to be children, if we are going to be like little toddlers, it is always better to be the **Lord's kids** than the **devil's kids**. We are regarded with favor, even if we might need a serious case of discipline. That is the flavor John brings to this sentence. He dearly loves these children of his.

Next we read **keep yourselves from idols**

We live in a world of extremes. And we would prefer to simplify our lives and see things in the extremes. We want **good guys** who are good and nothing but good. And we want **bad guys** who are bad and nothing but bad. But that isn't how life works out.

Along with that we want to simplify our theology as well. We want our understanding to be that **God does everything** that needs to be done in the Christian life. Or we want to understand that **we do everything** that needs to be done in the Christian life. And again, that is not how spiritual life works out. It is **God who works in us** to will and to do according to His good pleasure. But it is also **we who will and do**. Our decisions matter. And they are **our** decisions. Those decisions are things we are heavily involved in. And our decisions are **enabled** and **commanded**, but they are not **forced**.

Here we are told here to **keep ourselves** from idols.

Do you know what will happen if all you do is pray that God will keep you from idols, but you do not examine your life and your motives and your loves? You will worship idols. It is pretty simple.

There is something in the human nature that wants to **trust** in the place of **work**, and **work** in the place of **trust**. If God tells us to preach the gospel, we pray that people will be saved. If God tells us that He will forgive us if we ask, we keep trying to **earn** His forgiveness or His love, or we want to **deny** that we have sinned.

We like to see ourselves as submissive to authority. And we are, until our authority tells us we have to do something. I have rarely seen a submissive soul. Even though God tells us that He, and others, have the right to tell us what to do, we all tend to find issue with **the way** that our authorities tell us

that **we need** to do what they say. Have you ever noticed that there is always a reason that we should be offended at someone telling us to do something. Have you ever noticed that? Command your child to do something. Husband command your wife to do something. Employer, command your employer to do something. Elders, command your body members to do something. We all want to see ourselves as being submissive. And we rarely allow the counter evidence that, when told to do something, we find fault with the commander. You would think we would catch on. But our hearts are the trickiest people we know.

I don't know if there is any clearer example of our fallenness than that few of us naturally respond well to being commanded, not asked, but commanded, to do something that we do not want to do, even when the person who commands it has the authority to make the command.

You and I are commanded to Keep ourselves from idols. Remember from Isaiah that our hearts are **idol factories**. We will make our **spouses** or our **children** or the **blessings that God has given us**, or the things we **lust for**, or the things that we think will **give us** what **only God can give us**, our idols. We do it without thinking. We do it without trying. It is the flesh's proclivity. Everyone has a problem with this. And the first step is identification. What will you not allow the command of God to cost you? That is an idol.

It is our job. It is our responsibility to keep ourselves from idols. We might think that God should be sympathetic to us over the idols we choose, especially if they are family. Especially if they are human beings.

I have a big problem with this competing voice in the church that tells us to focus on the family. While certainly we have a great responsibility to lay down our lives for our families. And if we do not provide for our families, we are worse than unbelievers. And it is true that none of us will perfectly fulfill our duties to our families. While all this is true, it is wrong to think that our spouses or children are the highest priorities. It is wrong to think that we can formulate our opinions about God based on how our families work out. We are to keep ourselves from making idols of anything or anyone. No event in life is allowed to **take supremacy** to our **worship of God**, to our **service of God**. We do well to tell the truth about what it is that **we think we must have in life**, that we would **spend everything to have** in life. If it is anything but God, it is idolatry. We want to say, but God, I can't handle this. But God, I must have this relationship. But we are told in scriptures that God gives us everything we truly need. So our argument is bogus.

What do we worship?

God is very picky about who we worship. The greatest commandment is that we love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Look at His first 3 commands in the 10 commandments.

Exodus 20:3-7 (NKJV)

³ You shall have no other gods before Me.

⁴ "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;

⁵ you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me,

⁶ but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

⁷ "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain.

God does not just **hope** to be worshipped. He **demands** it. It is His **right**. It is His **privilege**. It is our **duty**.

In the old testament days the lines may have been simpler to draw. But I guaranty that **choosing correctly** was not easier. People did not choose idols of wood and stone because they thought it offered them nothing. These idols offered to make people happy in a way that they did not think that God would do. That is always what evil offers. It offers happiness. And it delivers thrills. But they die quickly. They are not worth the trouble. They are deceptive because the promise long lasting happiness but they never deliver.

What is idolatry?

Idolatry is when we depend on something to **give us what only God can truly give us**. All of us ultimately live for our own happiness. Think about it. Do you serve God because you think He promises you will be miserable? No. We serve Him because we think it is ultimately in our best interest. **We want the best that we can get for ourselves**. Well, true worship of God believes that it is in our relationship with Christ that we will experience **the best that life has to offer forever**. Well then, what is it when we choose sin? We choose it because we believe it will give us something better than what God is giving us. Idolatry is the problem. We think that something will give us what only God will give us.

So Idolatry is when we depend on something to give us what only God can truly give us. Another way of seeing it is that idolatry is when **anything takes the place in our lives that only God should have**. What are you willing to spend in order to please Christ? Are you willing to spend your wife or your

kids or your parents or your possessions or your life? We should make no mistake here. Anything short of a willingness to obey God at any cost is idolatry. When Jesus said what He said, He was not trying to be dramatic. He was speaking the absolute truth. He said this.

Matthew 10:37-39 (NKJV)

37 He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.

38 And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.

39 He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

One of the problems with us is that we have heard this often before. And it is easy for us to say yes, I agree with that theology, without considering our own lives.

Would you really do the right thing, even if it cost you your wife or husband or kids or friends? Would you do the right thing if it cost you the thing you love most dearly on this earth? That question might be too hard to answer. Let's make it easier. Will you do the right thing **now** even when it means the disapproval of those you **most want** the approval **from**? The hardest things I have ever done are the things I did only because **I knew they were right** and they **risked those things I most treasured on earth**. Remember when Abraham was asked to give up Isaac? Remember how he lifted up his knife, willing to do what God commanded? That is what Christ is worth. And that is what He calls us to. Abraham displayed that he would not make **an idol** of his son. He would not allow the gift God gave him to become his god. He would not hold that which God had given Him above God Himself.

Oh we are so much like children. We so quickly get fixated on that which is in front of us and lose site of the one who truly loves us.

Oh little children, keep yourselves from idols

Idolatry is also when we dedicate the resources of our lives to anything to the degree that **only God should get them**.

Again, this is just a poignant question in a sermon. We are used to that. Many of us have heard thousands of sermons. But what about our minutes? How many of the minutes that you have the freedom to spend however you would like, are spent on things that last forever? How many minutes are invested in eternity? How many are lived because you really believe this God who has spoken?

Count them. You can. We all have clocks. We all have paper. What are we spending our lives on? What do our lives say that we believe? I had created a

game for Jeremiah and Sam and I. It used an arbitrary scale to measure the value of what we spent our time on. It was surely not a statement on how God evaluated our lives. But it was helpful in showing the reality of how we spend our time. Maybe I should pull it out again.

We are showing **what we love**, what we **believe**, what we **worship**, with our hours. There is no way to deny that. What do we love? What do we worship? Look at your hours. Look at your dollars. We show it regularly. It is not the mystery we would like it to be. It is not measured by intentions. It is measured by actions.

Evaluate your minutes, not your intentions, if you want to know yourself. Evaluate your reactions, not your doctrine, if you want to know yourself.

Oh little children, keep yourselves from idols

Now why did John say this when he did? Some scholars believe that this sentence is the last sentence given chronologically in the Bible. When an apostle of Christ, the last living apostle, gives his last statement, it is worthy of paying attention to. We do well to shut up and listen.

And John tells us to keep ourselves from idols. Why?

Well look at what he said in the verse before this.

1 John 5:20 (NKJV)

²⁰ And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may 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.

The statement is all about the **true God** that can save us, the **true God** that is worthy of worship. The **true God** that we are in and who is in us. It is the God that offers us eternal life. This is the only God **worthy** of worship. This is the true God we are **called** to worship. This is the true God that will **reward us generously** if we will just continue to follow Him.

And what is the alternative to worshipping this true God? Well, it would logically have to be **an idol**.

And what does an idol consist of? Anything other than the one true God. Remember in Isaiah we talked about how there is the **worship of God** and then there is **everything and anything else**. Everything else is idolatry. Our brother John is warning us. We cannot accept any compromise. We cannot allow our loyalties to stray.

In the context of 1 John, John is talking about the idolatry of an **idea about God** that is not true. He is talking about the idolatry of **Gnosticism**. He is talking about a Jesus who was not God/man. He was talking about an idea that let people off the hook for the sin that their bodies committed. It was a false worship that did not submit to God. A **false Jesus** is just as much an

idolatry as a **statue of Baal**. An **idea of God** that substitutes for the **reality of God** is the nature of **all** false images.

John was telling his readers, and us, to not allow ourselves to be suckered into the life of idolatry. He is telling his little vulnerable childlike, dearly loved children, one last thing. It was one last warning.

Don't allow your worship of the one true Christ to be sidetracked into any form of idolatry. We cannot allow an idol to steal our hope and our joy. John has built a solid foundation that our hope and joy are only in Christ. And John would not have us lose that glorious gift for any false promise that our enemy would whisper in our ears.

And that is John's final sermon to us in the letter he has written to us.

"Dear children that I love. Don't allow the **false** to **steal you from the true Savior** and the **true salvation** that is promised to provide you with **eternal joy**. And it is **you** that must keep making that decision.

Keep yourself from idols."