

Sermon 52, Responding to 1 John, 1 John 5:21

Proposition: If you've gotten the point of this letter, you will flee idolatry.

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Introduction

John ends with this little tag. At first glance, it is unlike the ending of any other book in the Bible. A little more thought shows that most of the epistles actually end with a warning of some kind — thus, 2 Peter (immediately before 1 John in canonical order) talks about falling away with the wicked, while James ends with the warning about someone wandering from the truth. Nonetheless, John bucks the desire to end on a positive note, e.g., the declaration that Jesus is the true God, and instead ends on a major downer. He was old and had lived long enough to see that oftentimes a warning is the best way to leave the conversation. And so, he tells us readers that if we really got his point, we will flee idolatry.

I. You Are In Danger of Idolatry

John wants us to keep ourselves from idols. What does this tell us? That we are at risk of idolatry! A woman once called the church office asking for help because she was a single mom and complaining that church people are judgmental and don't want to give her a break because she's a single mom. I asked her if she could think of any risk factors for becoming a single mom, and she couldn't think of any. Brothers and sisters, can you think of any risk factors for idolatry?

Remember, an "idol" means etymologically "something seen." It is the diminutive of "visible object," and its counterpart word, "idolatry," means "worship of something visible." From that root, the word came to mean the worship of anything non-Divine. You are in danger of idolatry when anything tempts you to worship something that is not the true God and eternal life. In particular, of course, John has highlighted danger from three different sources of idolatry over the course of this letter.

A. False prophets/Antichrists

The first of these is the threat posed by false prophets, otherwise known as antichrists. The threat here is not so much that you will run into someone who keeps a little bronze or wood statue to which he prays and before which he sits in adoration, rather as Queequeg did before his god in the opening chapters of *Moby-Dick*. Rather, the threat to which John constantly refers over the course of this letter is that you will get Jesus wrong. Led astray by false teachers who are truly antichrists, you might begin to believe that He is not actually God the Son. You might think that God's Anointed is not the same person as the man Jesus of Nazareth. Or you might think that the historical man Jesus of Nazareth was never actually anointed by God. Or you might believe that God's Anointed is a created being like you, not the true God in the same sense that the Father is.

Now, are you going to be tempted by someone who comes to you and says "Deny the deity of Christ!"? Possibly not. I have met such people, of course. In addition to the predictable visits from Jehovah's Witnesses, I've had conversations with affable and generous Mormon neighbors. I have read an article titled "Christianity Made Me Muslim," by a Brit who converted to Islam. I've even met a homeless anti-Trinitarian in the park while having dinner with friends. This guy had a big flip chart that he carried around with him that purported to explain that the historic doctrine of the Trinity is nonsense. He might not have been as well-groomed as his Mormom counterparts, but doctrinally he agreed with them on this issue. Anyway, brothers and sisters, though you are unlikely to run into a persuasive Queequeg who will tell you that your best life can come out of a little bronze statuette, you are quite likely to meet a persuasive and friendly anti-Trinitarian of one kind or another in your daily life.

What's the attraction? Why do people want to deny the Trinity? The short answer is that if the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then your sin is very bad. If God really is Triune, then you are not getting out of jail free. There is no way around it. The doctrine of the Trinity means that the Creator God, the High God, is also the one who knows your name and who knows your faults. Yes, He died for them too — but you have to humble yourself to admit that God Almighty had to come down and die in dust because that's how bad your sin was. But if you can drop the doctrine of the Trinity in the name of all that is rational, then you can also drop anything else about God, also in the name of all that is rational. If your rationality can trump the revelation of God in Christ that's documented in the pages of Scripture and taught faithfully in the church, then your rationality can also explain why your sin isn't so bad, why God won't really hold it against you, why Jesus didn't really need to die in your place, and all the rest of it. Unitarianism is the doctrinal outcome of letting go of anything angular in Scripture in the name of all common sense. And once you introduce the name of all common sense, you can drop anything uncomfortable in the Christian message — absolutely anything. Soon enough you've Enlightened it all away, and you're co-authoring with Immanuel Kant *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.

How do the false prophets and antichrists tempt you to deny Jesus's humanity, deity, and anointed-ness? They tempt you by conjuring up a vision of a faith tailored to your liking. They show you a god made in your image, and boy that deity looks pretty good — acceptable to all of your cultural predilections, comfortable with your foibles, and happy to oblige. That's the kind of idolatry John is warning you against. If you were Queequeg and grew up in Queequeg's culture, well then, you would be tempted to worship the statuette. If you're you, and grew up in contemporary American culture, then you're not tempted by the statuette. You're tempted by wealth, pleasure, fame, entertainment, moral crusades against the unjust structures of society, and solutions that throw money and sociological expertise at the problem rather than (I didn't say in addition to, but rather in opposition to) taking seriously the idea that the rule of the Prince of Peace will solve the problem.

So what should you do about the idols of our age — the idols you're tempted to worship, that inevitably start with denying the Trinity and thus relativizing the person and therefore also the work of Christ?

Keep yourself away from them! Don't listen to the antichrists, the false prophets, the teachers who say that with the right ideology, evidence-based practices, and technocratic decision-making Jesus is superfluous. Don't pay attention to the idols. Keep yourself from them. We'll talk more in a minute about how the gospel makes idolatry unnecessary.

B. Sin

But first, we need to talk about the other great risk factor for idolatry. We already talked about the desire to have a common-sensical, respectable religion. That is undoubtedly the biggest risk factor for idolatry for many respectable people. But this second one is perhaps an even greater risk factor for most of us. Idolatry means worshipping anything that's not God. Practically speaking, to worship an idol means to look for fulfillment and satisfaction to anything that's not God. It means to seek your life purpose in pleasure, power, fame, wealth, gadgets, or a host of other things that are good in themselves but totally inadequate to be the thing you live for.

You can deny the Trinity and the historical Jesus for the sake of keeping your religion within the limits of reason alone. Or you can ignore the Trinity and Jesus because you want to have your own way. You flat-out prefer and enjoy sin. Brothers and sisters, that's a scary place to be. But it's a place where most of us have been. "I would rather have my booze, porn, and foul mouth than all that goody-two-shoes Christian crap." Have you ever felt that way? Or that, even if you didn't want to deny God altogether, you at least wished to postpone His claims into the remote future? "God, we'll talk about it some other time. God, we'll deal with it later. Can't you see I'm busy?" Brothers and sisters, that is an idol. In the final analysis, to postpone dealing with God because you want to keep on with your sin is to be an idol-worshipper, an idolater — exactly the thing John doesn't want for you.

How do you and I keep away from the desire for respectability that can totally sap our commitment to the message of Jesus? How do we shun the attractions of sin?

C. The World

The temptation to worship this world and the things that are in it is particularly strong for we who are surrounded by such a profusion of stuff! In the last year, I have spent way too many hours thinking about everything from a new iPhone for Alexa to a new gas-burning heater for Seth in the basement to a rolling doorstop for Saskia's door to you name it! Are we really living for more and better consumer goods?

False teaching is a risk factor for idolatry. Your own sinful flesh is a risk factor for idolatry. And the world is a risk factor for idolatry. So what can save you from idolatry?

II. The Gospel Keeps You From Idolatry

The answer is that the gospel. The answer lies in the life that was from the beginning and was manifested to John and the other eyewitnesses. When you have the good news about life in Jesus, you don't need to resort to idols. Just as I don't have to eat bologna past its prime when I have a dry-aged porterhouse fresh off the grill, so I don't have to seek life in the idols of our age when I have the real thing already in Jesus.

A. What You Know: Jesus, the Real God

To keep yourself from idols, you have to remember what John has already said. You know the Son of God. In fact, you are not just one of His acquaintances; you are actually united to Him in an indissoluble union. Therefore, you don't need to worship an idol. You don't have to look to food to fulfill you; you have something much better.

B. What You Have

You have Jesus Christ! And with Him, as John has emphasized here at the end of the letter, you have two other things overwhelmingly worth having.

1. Eternal Life, 5:20

As John just mentioned, you have eternal life. You are going to outlast this world. I think all of you bought your newest smartphone with the expectation that you would outlast it. "When I die, I won't be carrying this phone I'm buying; I'll be carrying a much newer, nicer phone that will be way better all the way around." You expect to outlast your gadgets; do you expect to outlast this entire planet? Do you expect to outlast the world? If you do — and you really should, if you actually believe in Jesus! — then you will hardly be willing to sell your soul for something that will endure for a far shorter time. You have eternal life; therefore, idols are of no interest to you. Why would you live for entertaining experiences when you already have the most fulfilling relationship imaginable with the living God? Why would you trade character for money when you will need character forever but only need money for a few more hours? You have that which mortals have always dreamed of — eternal life! Don't waste it. Live like you have it.

You might like stuff, but you like living more. You might like mouthing off, but you like living more. And so on. Of course, the Devil's old lie is that you can keep your life while walking down the path of death. Brothers and sisters, it ain't gonna work. Wherever you go, there you are — and if you go down to death, then that's where you are. In Christ, you have eternal life. That means, though, that you need to walk on the path of life. You need to go where

the life is — Jesus. You do that through prayer. And when you are where life is, you have life! You have something you value far more than anything else.

2. Access to God, 5:14

Prayer is another way of saying “access to God.” You like adrenaline? You don’t need to take up rock climbing or bungee jumping. You don’t need to do mountain unicycling. You can come into the presence of the most fearsome, terrifying, awe-inspiring being the world has ever seen or will ever see. Yes, I know, I know — praying is never going to feel quite like bungee jumping or having sexual intercourse. But it is more satisfying, more lasting, more sustainable than bungeeing or sexual activity or anything else that you and I might want to participate in. You can come into His presence. You know that you have what you asked, because the main thing all of us want is to be heard. Guess what? God hears! You can say it with me: Samuel, Shemu-El. The name means “God hears!” And He does. You might like cookies, but you like being heard more. You might like sex, but you like being heard more. You might like your gadgets, but you like being heard more. Well, in Christ you get a hearing. That’s how you can keep yourself from idols!

3. The Son of God, 5:12

Finally, you don’t just have life and a hearing from the Almighty. You have something better than life: His lovingkindness. You have the Son of God, whose mercy is sure and whose covenant is everlasting. You have life because you have the Son. People can be tired of life, but they can’t be tired of Jesus — not when they know who He really is. Do you spend the effort you need to spend to know who your Savior is? Do you find Him better than life? He is. And if you put in the work to taste that goodness, then you’ll know how blessed you really are. And your desire to worship idols and find satisfaction in them will go away. When I am drinking clean water, I really don’t want muddy water. When I’m eating shrimp scampi, I don’t really want dirty cucumber pieces off the floor. And so on. Brothers and sisters, you have the greatest Person in the world. What more could you want? What could an idol offer you that’s better than what you have?

C. What You’ll Do: Conquer the World, 5:5

So when you keep yourself from idols, you conquer the world. You know that you know Him. You have confidence in prayer. And so much more.

How will you respond to 1 John? Will you go back to your old, tired, unsatisfying idols? Or will you seek and find Jesus, the God-man, the life the apostles saw and to whom they testified based on their eyewitness experience? You’ve tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man that takes refuge in Him. Amen.