

So That You May Know

An Expository Study of the Epistle of **1 John 5:18-20**

Chapter 31- Guard Yourselves From Idols

289 Guard Yourselves From Idols- Part 1

WAOY Wednesday 12/10/08

Welcome again, my beloved in Jesus Christ. We are continuing to our verse by verse “journey” through the Epistle of **1 John**, and today we are going to begin to look at the very last verse of **1 John** as the Apostle John teaches us to guard ourselves from idols- so let’s look at **1 John 5:21** together:

1 John 5:21

Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

Now this is a very strange way for the Apostle John to end his letter. And it is strange for a couple of reasons.

First, of all it's strange to conclude an Epistle that is trying to build the Assurance of our Salvation with a command. You would think that John would end with a very powerful and encouraging Promise. But instead, God the Holy Spirit moved upon John to command his readers to do something.

And this becomes even more troubling when we realize that throughout this Epistle- John insists on the necessity of us obeying commandments as a prerequisite for any Assurance that we have in eternal life. And so here he ends his Epistle with one more command to add to the list he has already given us.

But what is really strange is that John not only ends this Epistle with a command- but he ends this Epistle with this particular command:

Little children, guard yourselves from idols.

So why does John bring idols up all of a sudden? This command seems to come out of nowhere. It seems to be out of context considering what he has been discussing in the three verses before this one.

If another Book ended this way- **1Corinthians**, for example- it would not seem so out of place because Paul devoted three entire chapters to issues related to idolatry. But in the five chapters and 104 verses of **1John** which took us 19 months to go over- John has not mentioned idols even one time.

So we need to try to see if we can understand *why* John ends this magnificent Epistle in this puzzling way. Of all the things John could have left his readers with- why does he want to leave us with a warning against idolatry? And as we begin to answer this question, we will need to define what these idols are from which we are to guard ourselves. And how in the world this command can be relevant to twenty-first century America where idols are ancient history, or are they?

So let's begin by trying to see idolatry in its broader Biblical context. Please turn with me and read **Exodus 20:3**:

You shall have no other gods before me.

Here we have Moses up in the Mountain with God and God is carving the Ten Commandments with His Own Finger into tables of stone. And in the next three verses- God says:

Exodus 20:4-6

4 "You shall not make for yourself ¹an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

5 "You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me,

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

And then in verse 17- at the end of the Decalogue- we are given this commandment:

Exodus 20:17

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

God said, "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or his computer or his job or her looks or her brains or their vacation or his car or his bike or his ministry or his health or her boyfriend or his praise or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Now the reason that I am linking all the coveting that is mentioned in **Exodus 20:17** with idolatry is because the New Testament clearly teaches that covetousness *is* idolatry. God Himself made that connection. Please read with me **Ephesians 5:5**:

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

So, Paul was moved by the Holy Spirit to make the connection and to say that a covetous man is an idolater. And then Paul said that a covetous man- who is an idolater- does not have any inheritance in the Kingdom of God. In other words- he is not saved; he has not been born from above and he is lost.

In other words- the covetous man- who is an idolater is going to miss Heaven and he is going to the same Hell that homosexuals and whoremongers are going to. So even though we don't list these things very high on our list of sins- God puts covetousness and idolatry right alongside of whoremongers and homosexuals. So this is a big deal and John was right to warn us of the horror of covetousness which is idolatry.

So because covetousness and idolatry are such evil sins in God's Eyes- it would behoove us to know just what idolatry is- wouldn't it? So just what is idolatry? Idolatry is valuing anything, or any person more than we value the one true God. An idol is anything or any person that takes center stage in our affections, loves, and desires.

You see, dear friends, God is a jealous God. And He is correct to be jealous because there is no thing or no one in all the Universe more worthy of our love and our devotion and our affections and our loyalty and our obedience than God. And to rob God of our affections and loves and to give those affections and loves to something less lovely and less worthy and less glorious than God is indeed a horrible offence to God.

And while we are mostly concerned with our own agenda and our own dreams and plans and what offends us- God is very concerned about His Agenda; and His Dreams; and His Plans and those things that bring offense to Him. And the believer is counseled to pray, *“Not my will- but Thine be done”*.

So anything that might not normally be a blatant sin in and of itself and yet if it robs God of the affections, loves, and desires that only rightfully belong to Him- then that thing at that point is an idol and if we insist of pledging our desires to it- we are then idolaters.

And it could be anything- a spouse; a child; a humanitarian project; pornography; drugs; power over the poor; or even religion. We humans have an enormous capacity to turn otherwise noble things into being an idol by the way in which we attach our affections to it.

An idol then is a God-substitute. The Science of Archeology limits idols to stone statues; But Biblical Theology teaches that idols are anything that takes the place of God in our lives. And when properly understood this way- we realize that idolatry is not ancient history but is alive and flourishing in America as we simply live our lives to fulfill the American Dream. Therefore- John's closing command "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" has as much relevance in our day as for any generation since Creation.

But now we need to raise the question: *“Okay, John, we realize that idolatry is a relevant topic, but why do you conclude your Epistle this way?”*

And John's response to us is this:

“People of 21st Century America- I have been your instructor over these five chapters. You have been a very attentive congregation. And it's only fair that I give you one final exam. So, I concluded my letter with a riddle:

Little children guard yourselves from idols.

My intention in saying this is that you be initially perplexed, so that you think and probe and discuss until the light bulb clicks on. And then you will see how this fits in with everything else that I have said to you in this Epistle. And when you see, you will want to obey.

And dear friends- as I thought and probed and discussed this- I did begin to see things that I had never seen before. And the first thing I saw was so obvious that I couldn't believe I had never seen it before. **1John 5:21** is not a bolt out of the blue; it is not a verse that is out of context. In fact- it perfectly follows verse 20.

The repetition of a key word in verse 20 leads naturally into the command of verse 21. So in order for us to see this- let's read **1John 5:20** again together:

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. This is the true God and eternal life.

And then verse 21:

Little children guard yourselves from idols.

The key word in verse 20 is the word, "true." True in the sense of "real." The purpose of Jesus coming into the world according to verse 20 was to help us understand that God is real; that He really does exist; He really is Light; and He really is Love. God is not a figment of our imagination. He is the ultimate reality of the world.

And I remember very clearly the struggle that I had in my own life when I found out that Santa Claus was not real. It devastated me- on two fronts. First of all- I was hurt because I realized that for about five years- my parents and grandparents and friends and teachers and a whole lot of people had lied to me- because they had fed me the lie that a man was coming once a year to give me toys at Christmas. And that hurt me that the people that I trusted for everything had lied to me.

But I was hurt on another level because if Santa Claus was a lie- then perhaps God was a lie too. The same people who lied to me about Santa Claus were the very same people who told me that there was an invisible God up in Heaven Who heard my prayers and Who loved me. Now that I realized that everything these people told me was not true- how did I know that they had not also lied to me about God?

So, this was a big deal to me. And this doubt about God went with me all through grade school and into Jr. High and into my High School years.

And I began to doubt *everything*. Maybe there was some mastermind who thought up religion and who created the Bible to fool naïve, desperate people. Maybe God wasn't real after all. Maybe there really wasn't a God except one we could dream up in our imagination. What a frightening thought for a nice boy like me to have.

Have you ever had those thoughts, dear friends? Do you even wonder now sometimes if God exists—I mean really exists? Is God real or is He just a concoction of our wishful thinking. Are we just playing games Sunday after Sunday?

You know what helped me to be rid of those doubts? **1John 5:20**. When I was 16 years old- I picked up a Bible and I read this verse. What is the solution to this doubt? The Apostle John's said the answer was Jesus. Jesus is the evidence that God is real. According to verse 20 Jesus, the Son of God, "**came and has given us understanding in order that we might know him who is true.**" In **1John 4:7&10** we are told that God, by sending Jesus to die for our sins, manifested His love for us, that is, He made his love real, concrete, tangible, unmistakable for those who had eyes to see.

So, the realness of Jesus guarantees for us the realness of God. And that is why John is so concerned throughout this Epistle that his readers remain true to the real Jesus.

Well, I have to stop right here, but please join me on the next broadcast as we continue our journey through the Epistle of **1John**. May God help us all.

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