

Idols and Christmas, Part 2

Isaiah 44:1-23

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Christmas approaches. You have less than 2 weeks to get your Christmas shopping done. Yet as the video showed us, much of what we purchase, give or receive will be obsolete, broken or worn out in a matter of months or years. It's not wrong to buy or receive gifts at Christmas. Yet it is possible to think key to our joy is what we give or receive as gifts at Christmas. It's almost like our primary love or worship goes towards the ceremony of giving and receiving gifts rather than the Christ whose coming we celebrate.

We talked about idols and Christmas a couple of weeks ago. We thought about how at first, it's pretty easy for us to dismiss the problem of idolatry in our lives. We're not like primitive people who worship before images of stone and wood. And even if we see the potential of an idol in something like TV watching or time on our phone, I have yet to see anyone bow down on their knees before the TV.

But then we looked at a definition of modern idolatry. **"An idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek, to give you only what God can give."** We talked about the different types of idols people can follow like religious figures or pop stars. We also talked about deep idols that may drive our behavior – like the desire for power, approval, comfort or control.

We talked about the subtle ways idols can work their way up to become our first love. Though we hear about Jesus as Light of the World at Christmas, we might actually be going into Christmas trusting our idols in an attempt to find whatever we seek. Even in our gift giving we may be tempted to feed our power idol by showing that we have the power to deliver some spectacular gift. Or we might be worshipping our approval idol hoping that those to whom we give gifts will approve of the gifts and us. Or we may look to feed our comfort idols with a gift we hope to receive. Or we may be honoring our control idol as we seek to exercise control over someone else by the type of gift we give.

But, God's Word reveals to us again and again that **It is foolish to give our trust to an idol instead of the only true God.** We saw this two weeks ago in Psalm 115. Today we see another example in the prophet Isaiah as we prepare for the final 2 weeks before Christmas. He wrote or spoke to exiled or soon to be exiled Israelites. They would be conquered by the Babylonians. When one nation conquered another, like Babylon would conquer Israel, the victorious people concluded their gods were superior to your gods. Where was Israel's God through Israel's defeat and exile?

What were the exiles in Babylon supposed to think about their God when it looked like Babylon's gods were way stronger? Where was God? Was God powerful? Was God real? Maybe they should consider worshipping these other gods.

Similar thinking can move us towards trusting some idol. So we continue our lead up to Christmas by considering this message from Isaiah. I want you to see the contrast it presents between trusting God and trusting idols. Then we'll see how we can, by God's power and strength, identify and replace our idols with our one true Lord, Jesus Christ. Please find Isaiah 44 in your Bibles or on your devices. It's on page 518 in the Bibles in front of you.

Isaiah 44:1-22 (ESV)

44 "But now hear, O Jacob my servant,

Israel whom I have chosen!

² Thus says the LORD who made you,

who formed you from the womb and will help you:

Fear not, O Jacob my servant,

Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

³ For I will pour water on the thirsty land,

and streams on the dry ground;

I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring,

and my blessing on your descendants.

⁴ They shall spring up among the grass

like willows by flowing streams.

⁵ This one will say, 'I am the LORD's,'

another will call on the name of Jacob,

and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,'

and name himself by the name of Israel."

⁶ Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel

and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:

"I am the first and I am the last;

besides me there is no god.

⁷ Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and set it before me,

since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

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."

⁹All 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. ¹⁰Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? ¹¹Behold, 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.

¹²The 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. ¹³The 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. ¹⁴He 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. ¹⁵Then 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. ¹⁶Half 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!" ¹⁷And 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!"

¹⁸They 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. ¹⁹No 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?" ²⁰He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

²¹Remember these things, O Jacob,
and Israel, for you are my servant;
I formed you; you are my servant;

O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me.

²²I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud
and your sins like mist;
return to me, for I have redeemed you.

The Israelites were trouble. They suffered because of their unfaithfulness to the Lord. To bring them back, God allowed them to be conquered & exiled. But in the first verses of Isaiah 44, the Lord promises refreshment. He reminds them that He made them and formed them in the womb. He would not forget them. He would help them. He commands them to fear not because of His compassionate concern for them.

In verse 3, the Lord paints a picture of refreshment with water pouring out onto a thirsty land and streams flowing over a dry ground. The dry land didn't do anything to get the water and streams. It needed water and streams for refreshment. It needed an influx of life to come to life.

This is what God does for His people through His spirit. So in the second half of verse 3, he connects refreshment to the Spirit. "I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows flowing by streams." The seed of Jacob, languishing in its condition of spiritual bondage would come to life because of God pouring out His Spirit. As a result, we see a luxurious and blessed picture of grass growing and trees by streams. Remember, Israel is located in a pretty dry area of the world. So if there was grass, it meant there had been rains and streams to water the ground.

With this refreshment, God's people will declare themselves as belonging to the Lord according to verse 5. Some will say "I am the Lord's." Some will call on his name. Another will write on his hand "The Lord's." Or they will name themselves after Israel, the people of God. So God provides reassurance of His care, concern and provision for his people in a dry and thirsty land.

Then He begins to address this issue of other gods. He first points to Himself as the only God. If you ever need some inspiration about God's supremacy and power, meditate on Isaiah 44:6-8. We are told the Lord is the King of Israel and Redeemer and the Lord of hosts. This great King declares he is the first and the last. No other god exists besides him. No other God has ruled throughout history. Other so called gods cannot discern the future and know what will happen. God is the only rock that we can cling to through our entire lives and into eternity. God is the only rock who has upheld His people and the universe throughout history.

You'd think that verses 1-8 would be enough to convince anyone that we must give God the supreme place in our lives. But placing other gods above the one true God has been a problem for God's people throughout history. God anticipated this problem. You may have heard of the 10 commandments. What is the first commandment?

You shall have no other gods before me. Have you ever asked why this might be the case? Why not start with stealing or lying? Martin Luther argued that it's because the fundamental motivation behind law-breaking is idolatry. We never break the other commandments without breaking the first one. We fail to love or fail to keep promises or live selfishly generally because we are weak and sinful. But specifically we act this way because there is something more

important we feel we must have to be happy; something that is more important to your heart than God himself. We would not lie unless we first had made something – human approval; reputation; power over others; financial advantage – more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace and favor of God. (Tim Keller – Counterfeit Gods).

So we need constant reminders to guard against letting idolatry take hold of our hearts. God does this through the first commandment. But He also exposes the reality about idols. That’s what verses 9-20 is all about. Isaiah gives **reasons why idol worship is foolishness.**

Reason 1 – Idols can never rise above their human creators. Anything created by a human is not greater than that human. So why would anyone worship something created as if it has some greater power than the human who created it? Isaiah bluntly states the reality. All who fashion or create idols are nothing. Their idol creations do not bring profit in a spiritual sense. At the end of verse 11, God calls all the craftsmen and idol worshippers to stand forth in a court room setting. Defend their practice and belief that idols have power. Yet he knows they will be put to shame.

Then verses 12 and 13 describe how ironsmiths and carpenters made idols. The ironsmith takes a cutting tool and works it over the coals. He fashions it or forms his iron with hammers and works it with his strong arm. What did we just read in Isaiah 44:2? “Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb.” So God forms man. But now man forms its god? Yet even this man gets hungry and weak and thirsty at the end of verse 12. This weak human crafts an image that will somehow gain power?

The carpenter takes a piece of wood. He shapes it into the image of man. This “man” is going to dwell in a house or a shrine that the carpenter builds. Isaiah charitably commends the carpenter for his skill by calling the image beautiful. But the gift of great craftsmanship given by the true God is used to fashion a false god. The criticism continues by noting the source of the wood from which the carpenter carved the idol. Wood comes from trees that grow in a forest that started as a seed in the ground. It needed rain to grow. Ground, rain and sun all ultimately come from the one true God. But the idol maker and idol worshipper don’t recognize this.

Then Isaiah provides a tragically humorous image in verse 15-17. The idol maker gets the wood from the forest. He uses some of it to start a fire. He or his wife bakes bread over the fire kindled by this same wood. And he takes the other block of wood and makes a god out of it. He falls down and worships it. So with one half of the wood, he makes a fire to cook and get warmth from. From the same block of wood, he fashions of god. There’s no difference between the

two halves of wood. Yet somehow he believes his own craftsmanship makes this part of the wood supernatural. Then he prays to the wood, "Deliver me for you are my god!"

What did he pray for deliverance from? Misfortune. Oppressors. Crop Failures. Legal problems. Lack of rain. Yet we know that even if he prayed to a piece of wood, it didn't actually deliver him. It was only the common grace of God that may have saved Him. We conclude, "We're very far from the foolishness of something like this."

But wait a minute. We seek deliverance from boredom; lack of purpose; lack of power; lack of control; disappointments; A bad experience – ignored at school; left off the invite list to a wedding or party; teased; humiliated in front of the class by a teacher or student; humiliated on social media; maybe we are in a difficult job environment; maybe there is someone at work that creates conflict or causes us stress so that we're thinking about them at home. Maybe we're struggling with uncertainty about the future or some big decision we have to make. Maybe we face some serious health problem – or someone in your family has some health issue that significantly affects your life. We naturally want deliverance or relief from these situations. We just want them to be over or to forget about them.

So we might try to find deliverance at least temporarily – through our idols. We go to mind-numbing escape through a game, entertainment, TV or some fantasy. We try to find good feelings through intoxication or getting high. We try harder to gain approval, certification, control or power. We go out and buy something or go out to eat. We feed our idol by giving it more time, money and passion.

Yet none of these can provide the kind of deliverance Jesus can bring. Jesus brings deliverance from sin; guilt; alienation from God. He delivers from lack of purpose by giving us the purpose of a God-glorifying life. Jesus delivers us from a lack of love because He love us more deeply and completely than anyone. Jesus delivers us from fear of aloneness for He never leaves us. Sometimes Jesus does deliver us from something hard – he heals the disease; he moves the troublesome person to another department or class; he opens a door for a new future; he ends the bad thing happening. Other times, Jesus walks with us through difficult situations to deliver us from something more serious. God often works using the gradual deliverance model.

Look at what God did with Israel through the Exodus. In some ways, their deliverance was instantaneous. When God sent the death angel on Passover, Israel was released the next day. But 430 years had preceded that night. And after that night, God worked with Israel for 40 years in the desert before they actually got to enter the Promised Land.

They thought they just needed deliverance from Egyptian slavery. But they also needed deliverance from unbelieving hearts and the love of a comfortable life. They constantly said, “Let’s go back to Egypt?” Their comfort idol blinded them to the terrible slavery they endured there.

Jesus often works the same way with us. He gradually delivers us by rooting out the deep idols in our hearts. He sometimes does that through the difficult people or circumstances in our lives. These force us to look at ourselves and our idols honestly. Then Jesus reveals Himself as infinitely more sufficient and satisfying than some temporary relief offered through mind numbing escape or the forgetfulness brought on by a drink or drug.

Trusting in something created is foolishness. It doesn’t have any more power than the one who created it. Isaiah gives another reason why idol worship is foolishness. In a way it’s much more serious than the first way. **It leads to spiritual blindness and emptiness. (18-20).** Idols don’t have the power to give us what we want. But Scripture tells us they do have power to give us what we don’t want. We saw in Psalm 115 the statement – those who make them will be like them – dead and walking in darkness. Here the idol maker and worshipper go blind and suffer deception to the uselessness of their actions. Verses 18-20. They don’t know. They can’t see. They can’t discern. They can’t understand. Their hearts are deluded. They cannot deliver themselves. They cannot see that they are living or worshipping a lie. You might know people who are caught up in such a delusion right now. Or the Lord might have revealed that this is true of you.

Thankfully, the passage doesn’t end there. In verses 21 and 22, the Lord reminds His people that He has blotted out their transgressions. Then he calls them to return to Him. So if I were to summarize Isaiah’s message I would put it like this - **Instead of an insufficient idol, trust the all-sufficient Lord.**

But how? Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, talks about the need to find and replace our idols. This involves first identifying them and then replacing them with Christ.

So **how do we identify our idols?** Keller gives us several approaches.

1) Look at your imagination. The true god of your heart is where your thoughts effortlessly go when there is nothing else demanding your attention. What do you enjoy daydreaming about? What occupies your mind when you have nothing else to think about? Career advancement; dream home; a relationship with a particular person; what do you habitually think about to get joy and comfort in the privacy of your heart?

2) Look at how you spend your money. This can reveal our true heart love. Jesus says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” Matt. 6:21. Your money flows most effortlessly toward your heart’s greatest love. In fact, the mark of an idol is that you spend too much money on it, and you must try to exercise self-control constantly. If we love God and his grace most, we will give our money away to ministry, charity and the poor in astonishing amounts. But many tend to overspend on clothing, or children, or status symbols. Our patterns of spending reveal our idols.

3) Look for an overly emotional response to unanswered prayer or hopes. If you ask for something that you don’t get, how do you respond? If you’re a little sad and disappointed but then you go on, you can be pretty sure it’s not an idol. But if you respond with explosive anger or deep despair, then you may have found your real god. Like Jonah, you become angry enough to die.

4) A final test – this works for everyone. Look at your most uncontrollable emotions. Look for your idols at the bottom of your most painful emotions, especially those that never seem to lift and that drive you to do things you know are wrong. If you are angry ask, is there something here too important to me, something I must have at all costs? If you are afraid ask “Am I so scared because something in my life is being threatened that I think is a necessity when it is not?” If you despair ask “Am I so down on myself because I have lost or failed at something that I think is a necessity when it is not?” If you are overworking or driving yourself into the ground with frantic activity, ask yourself “Do I feel that I must have this thing to be fulfilled and significant?” Keller writes, “When you pull your emotions up by the roots, you often find your idols clinging to them.

But we can’t just identify our idols. We have to replace them. **Replace your idols with Christ by setting your hearts and minds on things above.** Keller again – “Setting the mind and heart on things above where your life is hid with Christ in God means appreciating, rejoicing and resting in what Jesus has done for you. It involves joyful worship and a sense of God’s reality in prayer. Jesus must become more beautiful in your imagination, more attractive to your heart, than your idol. That is what will replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot the idol and fail to plant the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back.”

We can know the Gospel love of God in our head but not in our heart. So we must put the gospel truths into our lives so they shape all we feel and do. This does not happen in 3 easy steps. It comes through the spiritual disciplines

like bible reading, meditation on God's Word, prayer and worship. It comes as we consistently connect with God to discover in Him all we really need. This process will take our entire lives.

Instead of an insufficient idol, trust in the all-sufficient Lord. Maybe today God revealed that you have been trusting an idol instead of him in some area of your life. Maybe the driving force of your life has been to exercise power or gain approval or experience comfort or take control. Maybe that's what you're doing even in your Christmas shopping. Yet none of these can supply our needs for close fellowship with God, joy and guidance through whatever comes in life.

So instead of continuing to trust them, you can trust Him. Remember how Jesus is so unlike idols. He has a mouth that speaks, eyes that see, ears that hear, a nose that smells, hands that feel, feet that walk and throat that made sounds as He pondered His response to questions. He is the light of the world whose coming into darkness we celebrate this Christmas.

If you have never actually trusted Christ in your life, now is the time for your salvation. To come to Christ involves turning away from trusting ourselves and our idols and turning toward trusting Him with our lives. It means we turn away from our good works to gain God's approval and trusting Christ's good work through the cross on our behalf. It means we turn away from a lifestyle of sin and turn toward life like Jesus lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. So will you trust Christ today? Or will you trust Him instead of some idol you've been trusting recently? You can do that during our Communion Prayer time. Or you can come the front after the service is over - there will be an Elder available to pray or you can talk with another Christian you know and ask them to pray. Let us go into the final 2 weeks of Christmas with Christ as King of our lives.