

Introduction:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (**Genesis 1:1**, ESV). God was in the beginning of everything. Therefore, we are striving to put God in the beginning of everything we are and do. If there is one aspect of our lives where God must be first, it is worship. As Jesus said, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (**Matthew 4:10**, ESV).

And immediately we might think, “Well that seems a bit self-serving.” In fact, I can understand why at this point skeptics and doubters accuse Yahweh of arrogance, selfishness, and narcissism. They say, “If a person were to demand what your God demands, we would think he was a self-aggrandizing megalomaniac.” I get that. I really do. However, please allow me to explain why you are actually comparing apples to oranges when you say that. Whenever a man demands this kind of subservience and worship, he is seeking to benefit himself. When Yahweh demands this, He is actually seeking to benefit and bless us.

You may ask what kind of benefit and blessing. Worshiping Yahweh sure seems like a lot of sacrifice and giving up. What do we get out of it? And why does it matter? It matters because worship changes us. And who or what we worship defines what that change will be. Like it or not, for better or worse, we imitate what we idolize, we resemble what we revere, we become what we worship.¹ Yahweh warns us against worshiping any other because other gods are false, useless, worthless, and dead. If we worship them, that is exactly what we will become. Further, Yahweh demands we worship Him and no other because He is the real and living God. Through worshiping Him, we become like Him. What an amazing blessing! Why would we even want anything else?

By the time we’re done today, we’re going to see God’s promises that we do indeed become what we worship. We will additionally learn the pitfalls of idolatry that Satan puts before us. We are learning these things so we can understand the shocking danger idolatry poses us. Finally, we are going to end up by seeing the answer to this frightening problem is the living God in the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ. Be ready, because when we are done today, I’m going to ask you to turn your life over to the resurrected Savior, either by cutting out the idols you’ve let creep back in to your life since you first turned to Jesus or by asking you to follow in the footsteps of Jesus for the first time through baptism. That is, just as He died on the cross, I’ll ask you to die to your sins. Just as He was buried in the ground, I’ll ask you to be buried in the water, being baptized by immersion in water. And just as He arose in victorious life, I’ll invite you to come up out of that watery grave to walk in new victorious life.

Discussion:

I. We become what we worship.

- A. The Bible is clear, when men follow false gods and idols, they become what they worship. **Psalm 115:4-8** and **Psalm 135:15-18**, repeat the same message. Those who make idols and trust in them become like them. In **II Kings 17:14-15**, Israel went after false idols and became false. In **Jeremiah 2:5**, Israel went after worthlessness and became worthless.
- B. There is a very powerful picture of this in the earliest record of idolatry among the Israelite nation with the golden calf on Mt. Sinai in **Exodus 32**. They worshiped a calf, but notice how God describes the idolaters.
 1. **Exodus 32:9; 33:3, 5**—*Stiff-necked people*: They worship a calf and then they are described with a word picture of an oxen hitched to a plow who stiffens its neck against the farmer’s direction. By the way, every time this stiff-necked language is used in the Old Testament, with the possible exception of **Proverbs 29:1**, it is pointing back to this event.
 2. **Exodus 32:25**—*Let loose*: This is a picture of a herd that has been let loose from its confines because Aaron the priest had opened the gate.
 3. **Exodus 32:8**—*Turned aside quickly out of the way*: This is the picture of a bull or oxen that refuses to furrow the direction the farmer sets for it, but is turning to go its own way.
 4. **Exodus 32:26**—*Gate*: Moses is pictured as standing in the “gate” of the camp gathering Levi to himself. Again, we have a picture of a herder gathering his herd at the gate.

¹ This lesson was inspired by G.K. Beale, [We Become What We Worship](#), IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL, 2008.

5. In this very first record of Israel's idolatry, the stage is set. Israel became what they worshiped. This imagery followed them throughout their history. In fact, notice in **Hosea 4:16**, Israel is a stubborn heifer so the Lord cannot lead them as a lamb. God wants us to know, we become what we worship. So choose what and who you worship wisely. In fact, let me drop this hint in. If we need to become lambs that can be shepherded instead of stiff-necked, stubborn cattle, who do you think we should worship?

II. Idolatry pitfalls

- A. In parts of the world, some still bow before images carved from wood, stone, or precious metal. However, we might think we have nothing to worry about that. We don't bow before statues. We don't make carved images of God. We are safe. However, there are more pitfalls into idolatry than statuary.
- B. Consider **Ephesians 5:5** and **Colossians 3:5**, both of which claim covetousness is idolatry. In **Philippians 3:19**, Paul speaks of those whose god is their belly. Idolatry is not merely bowing before a statue. Bowing before our own desires and passions is as much idolatry as bowing before a statue. In fact, idolatry, like all sin, is wanting something, anything, more than we want God.
- C. Stephen's **Acts 7** sermon presents a dangerous idolatrous pitfall that we especially need to watch out for.
 1. In **Acts 7:41**, Stephen refers back to that golden calf incident saying the people "were rejoicing in the works of their hands." Then in **Acts 7:48**, he connects the calf to the Jerusalem temple claiming "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands." Then he brings the connection home in **Acts 7:51**, declaring the Israelites are "stiff-necked." No doubt, these Jews caught the reference. Stephen is accusing them of turning the temple into an idol.
 2. This points back to the days of **Jeremiah 7:4**, when the Judeans, rather than listening to God, were heeding the deceptive words, "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD" (ESV). They wouldn't listen to the LORD of the temple, they simply trusted that they were at the right temple. It is not surprising that in **Jeremiah 7:25-26**, God says He had persistently sent His prophets to them, but they didn't listen or incline their ear, instead they stiffened their necks. Which takes us right back to **Acts 7:51-53**. Not only were those Jews making an idol out of the temple, they refused to listen to the prophets God was sending to them. In fact, they would kill the one telling them these things.
 3. This should really make us stop and consider. If we are not careful, we can take our own religious forms and rituals and make them useless by trusting in them more than we do in the God who gave them to us. When we trust more in the church than the God who dwells in it, when we trust in the pattern more than in the God who gave it, when we trust in the Bible more than in the God who revealed it, we will find ourselves just as guilty of idolatry as Israel at the temple of the LORD. All these are important. We must not treat them lightly or dismiss them. However, we must remember they are means to an end, not the ends in themselves. They are tools to develop our relationship with God, they are not God.
- D. There is one other idolatrous pitfall we need to grasp. The point we are making here isn't always about worshipping false gods. It can even apply to the way we worship the true God. After all, when Israel worshiped the calf, Aaron declared a "feast to the LORD" (**Exodus 32:5**, ESV). However, even while claiming Yahweh as the object of our worship we can actually fall into idolatry.
 1. In **Mark 7:6-7**, Jesus responds to complaints that He and His disciples don't wash their hands before they eat. He quotes the LXX of **Isaiah 29:13**, saying, "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (ESV). They worship the LORD, but their worship is vain. Jesus then goes on to say, "You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men" (**Mark 7:8**, ESV), and then, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition" (**Mark 7:9**, ESV).
 2. This points back to King Saul in **I Samuel 15**, when God had commanded him to defeat the Amalekites, leaving none alive and killing all the spoil. However, he kept the king alive and kept some of the livestock, ostensibly for sacrifice (**I Samuel 15:21**). In **I Samuel 15:11**, Saul had turned back from God and not performed the commandments. In **I Samuel 15:24**, Saul admits he had left God's command and instead listened to men. Where the rubber meets the road on this whole situation is God's description in **I Samuel 15:23**: "For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry" (ESV).
 3. What is the point? When we trust man's word instead of God's, pursuing our traditions, fearing what men say more than listening to God's directions, even though we are worshiping God in word and in form, we are no longer worshiping Him. We are committing idolatry. We are trusting in something other than God. Thus in **John 7:18**, Jesus explains when we speak on our own authority (the sin of presumption), we are seeking our own glory. We are worshiping ourselves above God and are guilty of idolatry.

III. The shocking danger of idolatry

- A. There are two opposite and extreme mistakes people often make when it comes to serving the Lord.
- B. The first is having heard about the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus says will not be forgiven (**Matthew 12:31-32**) and the sin unto death which should not be prayed for (**I John 5:16**), some begin to fear they have committed these “unforgiveable” sins, and no matter how much they repent, God will not forgive them. So they give up and abandon the Lord. Though we do not have time to unpack these passages in today’s lesson, we are right to tell someone there is absolutely no action you can commit for which God will not respond to repentance. In fact, repentance is the exact opposite of this sin. So, if you are repenting, you cannot possibly be falling prey to these sins. Thus, as long as you are living, no matter what you have done, you may repent, turn to God, and be saved.
- C. The problem is in our haste to answer that first mistaken notion, we may unwittingly lead to an opposite mistake with just as dire consequences.
 1. Some have the idea that they will follow their own path, sow their wild oats, worship who and what they want (though they rarely describe it in terms of worship), because there will be time later to repent before they die. Of course, since no one knows the day of his/her death, this sounds like a bad plan right off the bat. But there is actually an even more frightening reason not to take this course.
 2. Do you remember what **Psalms 115:4-8** said? God says the idols are blind, deaf, and powerless. What happens to those who make them and trust in them? They become like them. That is, they end up blind, deaf, and powerless.
 3. There is a troublesome passage that I long misunderstood, which I now believe is actually a play on this concept. In **Isaiah 6:9-12**, God calls Isaiah to go preach to Israel. God sends Isaiah to a people who refuse to listen and see what is being told them. So God says, “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (ESV). What is going on here? **Psalms 115:4-8** is what is going on here. Israel was becoming what they had worshiped. Instead of regarding the work of the Lord’s hands (**Isaiah 5:12**), they had turned to idols made with man’s hands (**Isaiah 2:8, 18, 20**). They are becoming like their idols, blind, deaf, and powerless. Even God’s message provokes them to become more and more like their idols.
 4. God is not keeping these Israelites from hearing the message so He can judge them in the end. Rather, by the natural consequence of their idolatry their judgment has already started. God warned them if they pursued idols, they would become like their idols. That judgment is happening. We know that ultimate judgment is coming, but there is a sense of on-going judgment. When we pursue idolatry, judgment will begin. We will become what we worship which makes it increasingly difficult to come to God.
 5. There is actually a good bit of evidence for this in the Bible.
 - a) **Acts 7:41-42**: Israel’s idolatry began with the calf, but because of it God gave them up to even more and more idolatry.
 - b) **Psalms 81:8-12**: God told Israel not to follow idols, but they refused to listen to Him. So he gave them up to their own stubborn counsels.
 - c) **Romans 1:21-32**: Because they started with idolatry, God gave them to the lusts of their heart. Because they pursued the lusts of their heart, God gave them up to their dishonorable passions. Because they did not see fit to acknowledge God, He gave them up to a debased mind full of all manner of unrighteousness.
 - d) **II Thessalonians 2:9-12**: As shocking as it may be, when we decide to ignore God, He will give us up to our own devices, and will even help us along our path of rebellion by sending delusions to believe what is false.
 6. Idolatry in all its forms is dangerous not simply because at the end of time we will be judged for it, but because idolatry has natural consequences that begin to bring judgment on us the moment we start it. The further we pursue it, the more it holds on to us, the more God gives us up to it, the more God will even help us pursue our false desires. Please understand, though it is true that as long as you are alive, you have the option to repent and turn to the Lord. It will never be easier to repent and turn your life over to the Lord than it is right now.

IV. The solution to idolatry

- A. Let’s go back to **Psalms 115** to see the ultimate end of becoming what we worship. It is certainly true that the Bible presents the picture of becoming what we worship. It did picture those who worshiped the calf as be-

coming like stiff-necked cattle. It uses the picture of the inability to see, hear, and act of the idols as a metaphor for people who are blind to God's presence, deaf to God's call, and powerless to respond. But there is a more fundamental picture presented in **Psalm 115**.

- B. Idols have mouths that don't speak, eyes that don't see, noses that don't smell, hands that don't feel, and feet that don't walk. If we trust an idol, we will become just like it. Have you ever seen anyone in that state? Have you ever seen a person who has a mouth that can't speak, eyes that can't see, a nose that can't smell, hands that can't feel, and feet that can't walk? I have. I've seen it every time I look into a casket at a funeral. The psalmist's point is actually very simple. Idols are dead and if we follow them we will die too. In fact, note **Psalm 115:17**. The dead don't praise God, they are silent. The final problem of idolatry is death.
- C. Understanding that, we can see an answer to this problem of idolatry. The more I pursue idolatry, whether through statuary, through covetousness and physical passion, through lifting religious rituals and traditions above the God they purport to worship, or by supposedly seeking Yahweh through my own authority, the more I die, the more I head to ultimate, eternal death, which is not non-existence but the tortuous existence in eternal separation from God. There is only one answer. I must turn from dead idols to the living God.
- D. One of the most common ways to refer to Yahweh in the Bible is "the living God." A quick search finds that phrase used in the ESV version 28 times: **Deuteronomy 5:26; Joshua 3:10; I Samuel 17:26, 36; II Kings 19:4, 16; Psalm 42:2; 84:2; Isaiah 37:4, 17; Jeremiah 10:10; 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26; Hosea 1:10; Matthew 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; Romans 9:26; II Corinthians 3:3; 6:16; I Timothy 3:15; 4:10; Hebrews 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22; Revelation 7:2**. We become what we worship. If we want to become alive, we must worship the living God.
- E. And was this demonstrated in any more real and powerful way than through the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Consider what He says of Himself in **Revelation 1:17-18**: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (ESV). He was so much the living one, death could not hold Him. Though he walked through death, He burst forth alive on the other side and now has the keys to Death and Hades, the realm of the dead, which means He can offer us life.
- F. **I John 3:2** says, "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him" (ESV). In **I John 5:11-12** we are told, "God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life" (ESV). **Philippians 3:17-21** presents two choices: ¹idolatry which leads to shame and destruction, or ²"the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (ESV).
- G. There is only one solution to the default of idolatrous death. Life in the living God; resurrection in the resurrected Savior. Turn to the living God and live.

Conclusion:

The choice we have before us today is not whether or not to worship. When we understand that at heart worship is "worthship," that is, attributing ultimate value and honor to something, we realize that the choice is not between worshiping and not worshiping, it is between worshiping Yahweh or worshiping something else. We are attributing ultimate value and honor to something. Though we may try to claim we're not making the choice to worship, we are choosing to honor, value, and hold as worthy something above everything else. There is something that holds our hope, that is our refuge, that we turn to in time of need, that we long for above all else, that we look to for relief and escape. We may not even realize it, but it is real. And while that may not seem like a very big deal, it is. Why? Because we imitate what we idolize. We resemble what we revere. We become what we worship. And if that is anything other than Yahweh whose Son died to bring us life, our only outcome is death.

We have only two choices, worship Yahweh and live, worship anything else and die. No wonder Yahweh has called us to worship Him alone. He wants us to live. Please understand, it will never be easier than it is right now to turn from your useless idols to serve the living God. Trust me, if you have that feeling that says, "I don't want to do that right now, I have some things I want to do first," that feeling will never get any weaker. It will only get stronger. Thinking that one day you'll have made enough money to finally pursue God or you will have sown enough wild oats or had your fill of pleasure or followed your own star enough or whatever enough to finally pursue God is simply not true. The more you walk the path of your idol, the more God will give you up to it, the more your eyes will be blind to Him, your ears deaf to Him, your heart hard to Him. And at some point, you may even slip into judgment as God not only allows you to keep walking your own path but even helps you along it. It will never be easier than today to turn to the Lord.

Is there an idol in your life? Have you been coming to church and trusting in that to save you despite the fact that some other god has actually had control of your life? It will never be easier than today to turn back to the Lord. We want to help you. If you want to make that need public, we give you this opportunity to come forward during our

invitation song. Or you can let your shepherds know by saying something about it on your connection card. They are here to help shepherd you to the great Shepherd. Don't hide your idolatry, it will only take over more and more. Shine the light on it by seeking God's help through God's people.

Or maybe you've never actually turned to God in the first place. Maybe you've simply been following idols. You may not have even realized that is what you have been doing. I invite you to turn your life over to God today. I invite you to turn to the resurrected Savior today. Perhaps it is too much to ask you to completely turn your life over to God this morning. Maybe you have questions and doubts. Maybe you are frightened of where that will lead. Let me invite you to simply take a step in God's direction. Perhaps you can at least take the step of the man with the demon-possessed son in **Mark 9:24** who couldn't say, "I'm 100% convinced. I have no doubts." Instead, he said, "I believe; help my unbelief." If that is where you are, please, take that step. Indicate on your connection card that is the step you are taking and someone from the congregation will contact you to help you. Or come see me after the assembly is over. (Or if you are reading this manuscript online, please contact us through the website.) I'd be happy to get together with you and work together to pursue God through Jesus the resurrected Savior. But if you know you want the life that only comes through worshiping God, through giving Him your life, I want to invite you to follow in Jesus's footsteps. Just as He went through the grave and was resurrected, I invite you to enter the watery grave of baptism and be resurrected to walk in new life with Him.