

SERMON TITLE: “gods That Fail”

TEXT: Isaiah 44:9-20

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at the Biblical metaphor of the “Good Shepherd,” found in Isaiah and throughout Scripture. Last week, specifically, James looked at John 10 and how Jesus is the ultimate good Shepherd who comes to show us who God is and what a life of service to God and neighbour looks like.

We also saw that there are other rival shepherds trying to get into the pen. There are people, movements, ideas, and objects that tend to lead us away from our calling as God’s co-workers in the kingdom.

So today, we’re going to return to the book of Isaiah and look at the theme of idolatry. I did a quick word search of the word “idol”/“idolatry” and found that the book of Isaiah contains over 1/10 of all references in Scripture! Idolatry is a major theme for Isaiah!

A SATIRE

We have seen how prophets in the Bible were a strange collection characters who sometimes used creative and unusual ways to get their messages across. Our text today represents one of these ways. Sometimes it’s difficult to pick up on in translation, but Isaiah 44 gives us an example of *satire*. It is a sarcastic and somewhat humorous way of pointing out the folly of idolatry (the Bible isn’t always grim and serious!).

So, it’s a lengthy passage but we’re going to read the whole thing. Isaiah 44:9-10; 13-20:

⁹ *All who make idols are nothing,
and the things they treasure are worthless.
Those who would speak up for them are blind;
they are ignorant, to their own shame.*

¹⁰ *Who shapes a god and casts an idol,
which can profit nothing? ...*

¹³ *The carpenter measures with a line
and makes an outline with a marker;
he roughs it out with chisels
and marks it with compasses.
He shapes it in human form,*

*human form in all its glory,
that it may dwell in a shrine.*

¹⁴ *He cut down cedars,
or perhaps took a cypress or oak.
He let it grow among the trees of the forest,
or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.*

¹⁵ *It is used as fuel for burning;
some of it he takes and warms himself,
he kindles a fire and bakes bread.
But he also fashions a god and worships it;
he makes an idol and bows down to it.*

¹⁶ *Half of the wood he burns in the fire;
over it he prepares his meal,
he roasts his meat and eats his fill.
He also warms himself and says,
"Ah! I am warm; I see the fire."*

¹⁷ *From the rest he makes a god, his idol;
he bows down to it and worships.
He prays to it and says,
"Save me! You are my god!"*

¹⁸ *They know nothing, they understand nothing;
their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
and their minds closed so they cannot understand.*

¹⁹ *No one stops to think,
no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
"Half of it I used for fuel;
I even baked bread over its coals,
I roasted meat and I ate.
Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"*

²⁰ *Such people feed on ashes, a deluded heart misleads them;
they cannot save themselves, or say,
"Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"*

Can you hear the sarcasm dripping off Isaiah's pen?

(We see a similar example of this satire in Jeremiah 10:2-5).

*⁴ They adorn it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so it will not totter.*

*⁵ Like a scarecrow in a melon patch,
their idols cannot speak;
they must be carried
because they cannot walk.
Do not fear them;
they can do no harm
nor can they do any good."*

In our passage this morning we see Isaiah trying to use humour and irony to convey a serious message. Idols are worthless. They are false gods. *Don't worship them!*

He is scornful and mocking, but not just because he wants to be nasty. He is deeply concerned about the fate of his people. He knows what awaits his people for their disobedience—for their imitation of the very nations they were supposed to be an example to. He knows that his people will be taken from their home and will have to re-learn what it means to “have no other gods before me” in a strange land.

IDOLS: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

When most of us read about the warnings against idolatry in Scripture or satires like the one we just read, there are two closely-related dangers:

1) WE THINK IDOLATRY IS ABOUT WORSHIPING PHYSICAL OBJECTS

Perhaps we think of the Israelites at the base of Mt. Sinai dancing around the golden calf that Aaron had made for them after pooling their jewelry (Exodus 32). Perhaps we think of giant exotic statues from various Asian cultures that we have seen in pictures. Or, maybe something less exotic comes to mind...

Well, historically it has certainly been the case that human beings have fashioned physical objects to represent their gods. In the ancient world (when Isaiah was written) this was certainly the case. Mesopotamians worshiped mountains and trees, and “sacred poles.” Egyptian worship centred on the sun and the Nile River (as well as various animals), the nations around Israel worshiped various images of animals and humans and practiced all kinds of bizarre and sub-human rituals involving prostitution, human-sacrifice, and other things, usually to convince their gods to make them and their land fertile. So there are certainly historical reasons for our stereotypes of what idol-worship is.

But this is obviously not the world we live in. So we may have a hard time resonating with all the idol-language we see in Isaiah and elsewhere in Scripture.

2) WE THINK IDOLATRY IS NOT A “MODERN PROBLEM”

The satires we read in Isaiah 44 and Jeremiah 10 mock the stupidity of idol-worship, and it’s very easy for us to laugh along. How ridiculous, we think! Carving an image out of a piece of wood and then bowing down to it?! What’s the point?

On one level, this is exactly the response Isaiah wants and expects. Idolatry *is* stupid and pointless and the story *is* supposed to make that clear. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 8:4,

We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.

But on another level, the story will not have done its job if we simply laugh and move on. Then we are no different than the Pharisee in one of Jesus’ parables who thanked God he wasn’t like the ordinary miserable sinners in (Luke 18:9-14).

We are supposed to recognize the sarcasm and the irony, but this ought to lead us *to look at our own lives*. If all this text does for us is provide us with a humorous example of how silly some people can be, we will have missed the point.

Because there is no reason to think that the guy in the story is any different than you or I. We may not be particularly tempted to carve wooden statues to bow down to, or to melt down our gold into the shape of livestock, but the *constant* temptation toward idolatry for Israel should serve as a warning to us. Israel’s story is *our* story, and it should tell us that all human beings we are prone to wandering after false gods.

So how do we make the connection between biblical culture, which offered temptations toward different kinds of idols than we are familiar with, and our own?

The key is to see that the difference between our world and the ancient world is not the difference between a world where people worshiped idols and one where they don’t; rather, it is the difference between worlds that are prone to *different kinds* of idol worship.

CASE STUDY: A TRIP THROUGH THE GROCERY STORE LINEUP

I’m going to describe for you a recent trip through a grocery store lineup.

I am waiting in line and my eyes drift absent-mindedly towards the magazine rack. I am instantly presented with a broad collection of interesting cultural artifacts. I see glossy magazines filling me in on all the juicy details of the people I have never met, but who are “famous.” I discover such important information as: which famous person is cheating *on* another famous person *with* yet another famous person, how I can get “beach-ready abs” (so I can *look* like famous people), have “mind-blowing sex” (like famous people do, presumably), discover this or that famous person’s workout regimen, diet tips, yoga

recommendations, home decorating guidelines, voting advice, parenting suggestions, or pop philosophy/religion pointers.

There were certainly no shortage of opinions—publishers and advertisers practically lining up to inform me of how best to have the hard body, amazing sex life, and uplifting and inspirational religious experiences that I have always wanted. The goal of life, it seems, is to have a life like famous people do. And—what luck!—the famous people (or those who write about them) are eager to tell me how to do it!

So, are there any similarities between this and the block of wood in Isaiah 44? Or the idol that had to be wheeled around in Jeremiah 10?

Our “gods” of celebrity or entertainment may not be “fashioned by our hands” like the examples in Isaiah and Jeremiah, but many in our culture look to these things to give their lives meaning and purpose. Like the character in Isaiah’s satire, we devote a lot of time to our gods. We watch them on TV, read about them in magazines or online, we buy the products they endorse, etc.

But like the block of wood in Isaiah, while they might temporarily feed our need for meaning and control, the gods we choose are powerless to give us what we most need—hope, forgiveness, compassion for others, a vision of a life worth living.

Of course it’s easy for me to pick on something that I’m not particularly tempted towards. But each of us will be tempted by our own “false gods.” There are many things in our culture and in our own lives that can become rival gods to the one true God:

- Money
- Power
- Sex
- Nature
- Physical health
- Beauty
- Youth
- Sports
- Technology
- Ideas/knowledge
- RELIGION! CHURCH! THE BIBLE!
- IMAGES OF GOD!

One of my favourite authors is Frederick Buechner. Here’s what he has to say about idolatry:

Idolatry is the practice of ascribing absolute value to things of relative worth.

Each of the examples above is not harmful in and of itself—in fact many are good things! But they have *relative* value; they are not supposed to define who we are, or be relied on to give our lives meaning.

Dallas Willard has this to say in a book called *Knowing Christ Today*:

*Idolatry is a mistake about reality, and an error at the worldview level. It arises from the crying need of human beings to gain control over their lives... **In the end, the idol is always intended to be the servant of the idol-worshippers and their desires.***

This is the crucial difference between the worship of idols and the worship of the one true God. When we worship the created rather than the Creator, everything tends to wind up being about *us*. My obsession with sports becomes about finding worth and value in the team I cheer for, how my team or player does. If I obsess about the lives of celebrities I begin to live through them, following their ups and downs, etc. If my god is knowledge or how many books I've read or how intelligent I can sound in elite company, this becomes the most important thing in my life.

In each case, it is about *my* needs being met. The god serves me, rather than me serving God. I establish the parameters, not God. And when the objects of my worship are taken away, I am crushed; my identity crumbles because it was built on something that was never intended to support it.

From the beginning, idolatry—whether worshiping a golden calf, a piece of wood, a Hollywood celebrity, or a tree in the forest—is always rooted in the acceptance of a lie about God and a lie about human beings.

BECOMING WHAT WE WORSHIP

So we know a bit about what idolatry *is*. We see that there are many things we can *idolize*. What about what idolatry *does*?

One of the things that is basic to my understanding of who God is and what he wants from and for us is that God has our best interest in mind. God does not command things arbitrarily. He doesn't tell us to avoid things just because. There is a reason we are commanded to avoid idols and this reason is that it makes us settle for less than what we were created for.

Here's what N.T. Wright says in *Surprised by Hope*:

When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance to and worship that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that you become like what you worship.

So the prohibition against idolatry—in Isaiah and throughout Scripture—is not about a petty and jealous God who can't stand sharing the spotlight. It's not that God just gets ticked off when we worship something else instead of him.

Rather, we are commanded to avoid idolatry *because of what it does to us*. When we worship what is created as opposed to the creator, we become like the wrong things!

Psalm 115:2-8 puts it quite starkly:

² *Why do the nations say,
"Where is their God?"*

³ *Our God is in heaven;
he does whatever pleases him.*

⁴ *But their idols are silver and gold,
made by human hands.*

⁵ *They have mouths, but cannot speak,
eyes, but cannot see.*

⁶ *They have ears, but cannot hear,
noses, but cannot smell.*

⁷ *They have hands, but cannot feel,
feet, but cannot walk,
nor can they utter a sound with their throats.*

⁸ ***Those who make them will be like them,
and so will all who trust in them.***

Throughout Scripture, Israel's idolatry—their bowing down to the “works of human hands”—turned them into a people who *did* not and *could* not do/be what they were called to do/be as God's covenant people.

What about us? To return to the example I used above, what are we becoming like as we worship our idols of celebrity? What do we become like if we worship money? Power? Knowledge?

In each case, the object of our worship will influence the formation of our character—as individuals, families, as a church, as a community, nation, culture.... If we worship money, we will look at people primarily as potential clients, competitors. If we worship knowledge, we will come to value only that which we can use to add to our storehouse of ideas. If we worship sex, we begin to treat others as objects. If we worship celebrities, we become more shallow and superficial, always needing to be entertained.

But it is important to also note that for everything we are *becoming* in our idolatry there are also many things we are actively moving away from, things we are *failing* to become.

There are characteristics that contribute to human flourishing—characteristics that Jesus modeled as what it means to be an image bearer of God such as depth, contentment, creativity, insight, commitment, patience, and restraint, love of others for their own sake rather than for what they can provide for us... How will these important qualities be cultivated on a broad scale if we worship their opposites?

CONCLUSION

Last week James talked about John 10 and the false shepherds who try to lead the sheep astray. Later in this chapter, Jesus says these words that I think apply to the idols that tempt us:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

This is the contrast that I have tried to make this morning. Idols tell us lies about the world, about God, and about ourselves. As Jesus says in this passage, the results are not pretty. False gods always destroy us. No matter how tempting it is to follow the idols in our lives, the end result is that we become less than what we were created for.

But what does Jesus say about the reason he has come: that they may have life and have it the full. This has always been God's goal.

Later on in John 10 Jesus says that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep—that he knows his sheep and they know him. The picture is one of a Shepherd who would do anything so that his sheep can be what they were intended to be. A shepherd who knows that all of the rival gods that we run after instead of our true shepherd will fail—that they cannot deliver on what they promise. That they cannot meet our deepest need.

As James said last week, the comparison between human beings may not be the most flattering one. At least not on one level.

But the metaphor is not meant to be absolute. We are not dumb animals useful only for what we can provide for our masters. Jesus considered us to be so valuable, that he was willing to lay down his life for us. He wants us to know him and to be known by him. This is not the case for shepherds and sheep!

It is an amazing picture of a mutual relationship where we accept the conditions of our creation and in so doing come to recognize the dignity and the glory of what it means to be human beings created in God's image.

A final question, in closing: Have you ever paused to consider *when* the nation of Israel was often tempted toward idolatry?

In many cases, it seems to me, idols become attractive during periods when God seems absent. The golden calf came when Moses took too long coming down from Mt. Sinai.

Fertility poles and strange kinds of sacrifice become an option when God seems slow in keeping his promises. The examples are numerous.

Listen to what Isaiah says immediately after our passage this morning (Isaiah 44:21-22):

*Remember these things, Jacob, for you, Israel, are my servant.
I have made you, you are my servant; Israel, I will not forget you.
I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist.
Return to me, for I have redeemed you.*

Even when God seems absent, even when his promises seem far away, even when find ourselves in a barren place, even when the call of rival gods seems strong and compelling, *we must remember who we are and to whom we belong.*

God does not forget us. He made us. He forgives us.

And he always welcomes us back after we have been chasing our false gods.

Thanks be to God.