

Reading: 1 John 5:13-21 & Ezekiel 14:1-8

Theme: Keeping Ourselves from Idols.

Some advice we were given at Bible College about preaching was - stand up, speak up, shut up! Some people do not know how to end a subject or a message. Some of us, at time, are not sure how to start either! In the NT letters we see various forms of ending - either a doxology of praise as in Jude; or most often a reference to “grace” as in many of Paul’s epistles – he used a range of startling and beautiful grace endings - look them up. James ends his letter abruptly, while Peter’s two letters one ends with peace and the other growing in grace and giving glory to the Lord Jesus. John in Revelation ends with grace, and he ends his second and third letters with greetings. Yet his 1st letter ends with this strange instruction in v21 “*Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.*”

It is a warning and instruction. In fact, some scholars think that 1 John was probably the last book of the NT to be written. If they are correct, then v21 would be the last inspired word of God to mankind! Although uncertain about them as last inspired words, they are the last words of old man John in this letter to the church at Ephesus and area. John was writing to those he knew and cared for and even in this stark ending, it is prefaced with “*Dear children*” or “*Little children*” - as a term of affection. John was not writing as a grumpy old character, but as a loving father and friend. He saw that with all he had said they needed to be told this and to **remember it** as they left the church and the public reading of this letter when it was first received. In many ways we are spoilt, for we have the word of God in our own languages, we can take it away with us and read it. These early Christians had to commit things to memory or pay to have expensive copies made of the various letters.

We have to own it is a strange ending, but we are sure it was necessary for them **and for us**. John, guided and directed by the Holy Spirit, didn't write these words by accident and they are here on purpose and in this exact position. This final exhortation, warning is based on the three positive assertions John has just written and yet it is also in stark contrast to them. John had written of our state and situation as believers - born of God, not habitually practising sin, kept by Christ and not under the power of the evil one, also knowing Christ has come and that we have the true, real, genuine eternal life from the true, real, genuine God and we are in Him.

Now, says John in a stark, yet practical manner "*keep yourselves from idols*" - you may know the theology, but now work it out practically in your daily lives! This verse is as relevant to us in the 21st-century is it was to those at the end of the first century. To help us recognise this I have two headings:

1. Idols - What Idols?

We are to remember that Ephesus and the area around it was infested with pagan and idolatrous worship. Roman and Greek gods abounded, local deities were worshipped and even the nearby church at Pergamon seemed to have been infected with notions of idol worship (Revelation 2:12-17). Because of this, it made sense for John to write of the danger of worshipping the false and leaving the true; not to put these idols in place of the true God. We may question if that is relevant for our days, but realise this danger is as real now!

Christians the world over and we here in this church need this timely warning! It is a warning for us all - do not think it excludes you or me. Sadly, the heart of all people, even those born again of God, are factories for idol manufacture and these move us away

from the true, the genuine towards that which is false and illusionary. Idolatry is putting anything in the place of God in our lives. An idol is anything which occupies the place due to God. We are to “*love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all mind and with all our strength*” (Mark 12:30) and if anything interferes with that, then we have an idol!

It does not necessarily have to be a literal idol. Idolatry can take many forms - our religious tradition, our religious styles, even our theology! We may not have a literal idol, but there are a sacred-cows and we have idols hidden away in our hearts e.g. another person, however legitimate the relationship - parents, children, grandchildren, husband or wife; our country (*danger of nationalism*), our sport or team! It could be our work, our providing, our achievements, our status, our reputation, our wealth and possessions. None of these in and of themselves are necessarily wrong and we know that Christians need to love parents, children, grandchildren, husband or wife, they are to be good citizens, to work hard and provide etc. yet the subtlety of unseen idolatry is that these may take the place for God in our lives.

We can so easily manufacture idols of the heart and we saw Ezekiel warned of it in 14:1-8. In 2 Kings 17v9 we read of Israel (*the northern kingdom*) “*The Israelites secretly did things against the LORD their God that were not right.*” We constantly need our hearts dealt with as there is secret sin even below the surface of our obvious sin and we need our hearts i.e. our desires etc. dealt with. Sadly, the most powerful idol is self and what self wants. Woody Allen said “*the heart wants what the heart wants*”. William Cowper recognised this and wrote “*The dearest idol I have known. Whate'er that idol be, Help me to tear it from Thy throne, And worship only Thee.*” Oliver Cromwell said “*Idolatry*

is anything which cooleth thy desires after Christ.” The sin of idolatry is the distraction and distortion of our heart from its centre in God. Eve had this as she lost her focus on God and saw the fruit was good for food, pleasing to the eye, desirable for gaining wisdom (Genesis 3:6).

Idolatry causes a real and spiritual fog, so that we cannot see clearly and can so easily go off the correct way. As we are in our hearts, so will our actions be. That is why we need to examine ourselves in the light of the 10 Commandments - both the positive and the negative aspects of it, both God-ward and man-ward, so we are to be very careful not make an idol of our ideas of God, but let Him by His word and Spirit search our lives and we are to become more and more centred on God as He really is, for as we learn of Him and His ways, we are to desire Him more and more as the true, real and genuine God.

That is the danger we are warned of. None of us can presume we are idol free and not in need of the warning. If we think we are clear of this, then we bow down to the idol of pride which has captivated us! Idols, what idols? I hope we have seen some of the many we can so easily have in our hearts. Now see:

2. Keep Yourselves!

We are to keep ourselves from such idols. Please note my heading has an exclamation mark. I could easily have added a question mark because this command (imperative) is shocking and it appears to conflict with what John wrote in v18 that the once for all born one i.e. the Lord Jesus keeps those safe who are born of God, yet here we are told that we are to **keep ourselves** from idols! What is going on?

John is not contradicting himself and his first readers did not say “*Poor old man, he’s gone a bit dotty in his dotage!*” They would have seen, what is obscured in our English translation, that John uses 2 different words. The first word in v18 means to preserve, guard safely, reserve. The 2nd word here in v21 involves to guard, but in the sense of watch over - used in Luke 2:8 - the shepherds were “*keeping watch over their flocks at night*”; c.f. 1 Timothy 6:20; 2 Timothy 1:12 & 14 - NIV translates as “guard” and KJV as “keep”.

John is saying that we need to be careful, to watch, to guard our lives that idols do not nudge out, displace God and Christ in our hearts, whether they are literal idols or idols of the heart. We are all to watch our hearts, for we are told in Proverbs 4:23 “*Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.*” We are to be careful what we allow to come into the throne room of our hearts. Esther knew that no one could go into the royal throne room unless invited or else it was death. Sadly, the throne room of our lives seem so wide open to intruders. There is a scandal and investigation every time someone gets into Buckingham Palace unauthorised. Security is reviewed and scrutinised. We need to do the same any time an idol takes God’s place in our hearts. We need to be watching, alert, on guard to keep out idols which would intrude so readily and easily.

The trouble is that idols wear masks and disguises as legitimate things before jumping, edging on to the royal throne in our hearts. Guarding our hearts needs to be an ongoing work and its security must be ongoingly and constantly reviewed, improved and maintained. There has to be this balance in the Christian life. It is not “*Let go and let God*”, or else John would not have written this verse. We are being preserved, reserved and kept, but we have our part to play in the preservation process. We show we are being

preserved by going on in the things of God, using all the ways and means He has provided for us. I feel two verses in Philippians 2:12-13 catch this best “*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed— not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence— continue to **work out** your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is **God who works in you** to will and to act according to His good purpose.*”

In the context of v21 we are to do 3 things:

A. Remember the nature of idols: ask God to help us see things as they really are and not in the upside-down, topsy-turvy way which the propaganda of the world, the flesh and the devil would have us see things. Ask for discernment, so that whatever is captivating us, that if it was totally ours, that it would certainly not totally satisfy us and anyway if we had it, it would only be ours on trust, lent to us, given us for a while, but it is not the Giver, not the One who made all things. We are not to contentedly settle for 2nd or 3rd best, even if such a thing tries to convince us that it is THE best. The devil fobbed Adam and Eve off with some fruit and they forfeited eternal bliss for all mankind! The worst deal of all time! We are to recognise the temporary nature of things - people, relationships, pleasures, wealth, possessions, reputations... We are not to fix our worship on things and are certainly not to let them hinder our delight in and worship of the living and eternal God. Yes, we do receive things from God and we can rightly enjoy them, but they are not to take the place of God in our lives and affections.

B. Remember the truth of who God is: He is the real, true, the genuine God (v20) and we are in Him, in fellowship and in a relationship with Him. This is an awesome privilege. It is beyond the imagination and dreams of even the highest angels (*i.e. if angels have imagination and dreams!*) We, as redeemed people,

cannot only worship God, but walk with Him, delight in Him as we know His love as His child, we can spend time with Him and one day we will go and be with Him forever in heaven and spend all eternity being ravished by wave after wave of ecstatic joy, bliss and love. One day we will in our innermost being give Him all the glory as we ecstatically delight in Him.

To know God like this should cause us to have such a love force field – keeping out and expelling every other thing from entering our hearts. One glorious day it will be so! Now we are to do all we can to keep out idols and to have an expulsive love for God reigning in our hearts. Yet even in our failures to do so we are to:

C. Remember who we are: we are not to let the devil rob us of the view of who we are in Christ. The devil will delight to let us focus on who we are in and of ourselves, to show us our weaknesses, failures, sin, lack of love, proneness to security lapses as idols successfully jostle to get on the throne of our hearts, but we are to focus on who we are in and in union with Christ. We are God's people, redeemed by the blood of Christ, we are of God and our destiny is to be with God and the Lord Jesus in heaven with all its glory and wonder that centres on our Saviour. We are not under the devil's power, but of God and our treasure is in heaven and so the things of this world must be held loosely and never clutched to ourselves; also because of all our Jesus has done, self-worth is vaporised when we recognise and own that all that we have is sin – we are miserable sinner and only save by God's free grace. We are to see His guarding, His working, His giving us – all by the Holy Spirit - the true and genuine life and our knowledge and understanding of it. We are designed not for this world with all its fading pomp and pleasure, but are designed and destined for heaven.

Hudson Taylor was a great man of God, who incidentally visited Barton many, many times as his auntie and sister lived there and he wrote this:

*Lord Jesus make thyself to me
A living bright reality,
More present to faith's vision keen,
Than any outward objects seen,
More dear, more intimately nigh
Than e'en the sweetest earthly tie.*

Do we want to know Him so near, so dear, to have His close presence, to know we are in Him and He in us? In our sane and right mind moments, surely that is what we truly want.

If it was necessary for John's generation to keep themselves from idols, then realise it is still as necessary for us to keep ourselves in our own lives from idols so that only the Lord Jesus, King Jesus sits on the throne of our heart, to reign and rule there in our lives and desires. Then what peace and joy we will know.