

## 2: Flee Idolatry: The Lure of Closest Earthly Affections

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 11 June 2008

Preacher: William Philip

[ 0 : 00 ] Well, turn in your Bibles, if you would, to page 157 to Deuteronomy chapter 13. And we began this little chapter last week and looked particularly at the first five verses.

And we're going to look at verses 6 to 11 in a bit more detail today. So let's just read those verses, shall we? And having spoken about the lure of the prophet or the dreamer of dreams, the one who works spectacular things but leads you away from God, Moses now turns to something much more intimate.

If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter, or the wife of your embrace, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, let us go and serve other gods, gods which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the people who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, if that happens, says Moses, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him.

Your hand, think of that, your hand shall be first against him, to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

And all Israel shall hear and fear and never again do any such wickedness as this among you. Well, let's keep that open and we'll come to it in detail in just a few moments.

[ 1 : 51 ] But let's remember, first of all, our text for this little series. It comes from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, 1 Corinthians 10, verse 14. Therefore, my beloved, he says, flee from idolatry.

Now, that might seem a strange text to us today, but in fact, it is the consistent message of the Bible, right from beginning to end. Right from the Ten Commandments, through to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall have no idols. It's the first two of the Ten Commandments, isn't it?

And Jesus says exactly the same. He says that to the great commandment. What is it? To love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your mind and your strength.

He said the same thing, really, in another way when he said this. I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. No other gods.

[ 3 : 02 ] Well, hang on a minute, you say. That's all very well. But we are modern people. We are not primitive people. We don't bow down to idols. What possible relevance could something like this have to us in the 21st century?

Well, first of all, it actually is worth remembering, isn't it, that vast swathes of the world's population, even today, still do bow down to images and statues and gods of that kind.

I've seen it myself. I'm sure you have in many parts of the world. Like India, for example. A place where there's all sorts of mod cons, a very modern society nowadays in many ways, and many other advanced cultures too, but people still bow down to idols, to things that they've made with their own hands.

So it's not as irrelevant as we might think. But in fact, even that doesn't get anywhere near the heart of what the Bible actually means by idolatry. What is idolatry?

Well, it's the reverse of those first two commandments, isn't it? It's the opposite of the great command to love the Lord your God alone with all of your being.

[ 4 : 11 ] To love the Lord, the creator of the heavens and the earth with everything that we have. That's what we were created for, isn't it? We were made as human beings to worship and serve God, to image God, to reflect his glory and honour in this created world.

God is at the centre of the world and he made us as his chief worshippers. But what happened, of course, is that we turned everything upside down, didn't we? We rebelled against God and we put ourselves right in the centre of our story.

Listen to how Paul, the apostle, describes that in Romans chapter 1. Listen. For although they knew God, that's people, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Claiming to be wise, they became fools. What did that mean? Well, therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves because, listen, they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.

You see? Instead of honouring God for all that he gives us, we've deceived ourselves in futile thinking. We've started to live for ourselves. We want to be the centre of our lives and of the universe.

[ 5 : 43 ] And instead of worshipping and serving God, we want things to worship and serve us. But you see, when that happens, the things that you crave and desire and value, well, those things become your true gods, don't they?

They become the things that actually control us and rule us and enslave us. We start worshipping created things.

The things that we must have, the things that we must have more of, the things that we must have better of and newer of and finer of, the things that we need to give us, well, satisfaction, the security that we need in life, the meaning, the identity that we seek, the value that we want to see in our lives.

And these things that we worship, seeking those things, actually become our lords and masters. And that's why, friends, the lives of so many people in the world today are full of such anxiety and such jealousy and such resentment, such obsessions and pressure to succeed and lack of security.

Because, says Paul, we have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. We've worshipped and served created things instead of the Creator. We've rejected the truth, the truth that we're made not only by God but also for God.

[ 7 : 11 ] So that, as St. Augustine once said, our hearts will never be at rest until we find our rest in God. God made us to find joy and satisfaction and love and fulfillment and meaning, but he made us to find all those things in him and in relationship with him.

But, you see, human beings, we've lied to ourselves, we've deceived ourselves, we've said, no, I want to find all of those things myself and for myself and by myself and my way.

Isn't that right? But, you see, we seek the things that only God alone can give and that God wants to give. We seek them in merely created things, in impotent things, in finite things, things that can never, ever, ever deliver what we seek because they're not God, they're not the creator.

And that is idolatry and that's what the Bible calls the very essence of sin. And it's not just that it's wrong and offence to God that we spurn his amazing love and generosity to us, it's mad.

It's unbelievably foolish. It's absurd. Claiming to be wise, says Paul, they became fools. Only a fool takes a good thing but a finite thing and makes it an ultimate thing.

[ 8 : 37 ] Pretends that it can really be God, that it can be worth devoting our lives to, that it can give us anything. We've actually got a word for that, haven't we, in normal life.

It's called addiction, isn't it? You become a slave to something. It might be a very good thing in itself, tablets to help you get to sleep or it might be your work, it might be your hobby, it might be fine wine, whatever it is.

But it becomes something that you need. You're enslaved to it. You need it to function. You need it to feel secure. You need it to feel at peace. And you see, when that happens, it is no longer serving you, you are serving it.

It's your master. And that's idolatry. That's the essence of what the Bible calls sin. Building your life, your whole security, your identity, your future, on anything, anything at all other than God himself.

It's making something else more important than God in the reality of your life. And that's why sin is so terrible. For two reasons. First, because it's an insult to God.

[ 9 : 48 ] It's a flat rejection of God's goodness and his lavish generosity in being our creator, isn't it? And also, it's to spit in his face, too. It's to scorn the extraordinary depth of his mercy and his love because it's also to reject, isn't it, his amazing salvation.

It's to scorn the blood of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself in his own blood for us to save us from our folly of idolatry. And as long as we persist in thinking that we can find all that we need for our lives and our future without God, well, we're rejecting him as our saviour because we're seeking other saviours.

We're looking for our career or our love relationships or achievements or whatever it is. We're looking to them to be our salvation. And it's an insult to God.

But secondly, you know, it's an insult to ourselves, too, isn't it? Just because it's sheer folly, it's self-degrading to seek so much, to seek ultimate meaning and satisfaction and identity in such futile ways.

They became futile in their thinking, says Paul. Claiming to be wise, they became foolish. You see, we deceive ourselves. We live in denial about it just like the addict lives in denial.

[ 11 : 10 ] We don't admit the damage that we're doing to ourselves and that we're inflicting on others and on society by that kind of subhuman behaviour. Because that's what it is, subhuman.

True humanity, you see, is made to look upward to God, to find our real fulfilment in God, knowing him. But idolatry, you see, is subhuman.

It degrades us, it drags us down. Degrades us as the image bearers of God, just as it insults him as our maker. It dehumanises us, just as the addict dehumanises himself and does it to others around him too.

And friends, that's why idolatry is so serious and that's why God warns us constantly to flee from it. And we have to recognise it for what it is, however subtle it may be and very often it is very subtle in presenting itself to us.

We saw that last week, didn't we, in the first five verses of this chapter because lures to idolatry can often come in the guise of successful and spectacular spirituality.

[ 12 : 21 ] They offer much but in reality as verse five says, what it's really doing is causing you to rebel against the Lord your God.

But in these verses that we read together just now, verses six and following, I want to look at these and see the powerful lure that these verses contain towards idolatry. It's all about the lure of our very closest earthly affections.

It's very close to home, isn't it? But so often it is true, isn't it, that it's in our relationships that we go astray. Either because we end up worshipping them and seeking in them the meaning and the satisfaction in life that can only truly come from God.

Or it's because we're led astray by these relationships and in them to seek that fulfilment in other places other than God. To take our undivided devotion from him and place it elsewhere.

And that's what verse six warns us about, isn't it? Look at it. There can be real danger. Who from? Not from the bogeyman, not from the one who comes wearing a t-shirt saying, I'm your spiritual nemesis.

[ 13 : 34 ] No. Look at verse six. From your brother, your son and daughter, the wife of your bosom, your best and closest friend. That's a shock, isn't it?

If you can't trust your close family, if you can't trust your closest friend, what hope is there? But it's very, very real, isn't it? It often is.

Our very real loves and loyalties that can be the source of our agonies and dilemmas and struggles in our life of faith. Isn't that so? Just think of the young, eager student, for example, who's become a Christian at university and has gone off home for the vacation.

They're growing in their faith. They're very keen to serve and so they want to go off and spend the summer doing missions and camps and serving in that way. But their reaction of their parents is very different. What a waste of time and money.

Why do you want to do that? I'm certainly not going to help pay for you to do nonsense like that. Go and do something useful. Go on a trip abroad or get a job and earn some money. And it's very hard, isn't it, if that's what your parents say.

[ 14 : 44 ] Even harder if another couple of years later you come home and you say, well look, I really believe the Lord is calling me into full-time Christian work and I want to train for the mission field and for ministry.

And they're horrified and they want to persuade you out of it. Or it could just be that your spouse, your husband or your wife doesn't really share your own spiritual enthusiasm.

And that's very, very hard, isn't it? Verse 6, you see, speaks about enticing you secretly. It's a picture, isn't it, of relentless pillow talk that just grinds you down.

Think of Delilah and Samson, remember? On and on and on until eventually he cracked. And we can do that with our partners, can't we? You're spending too much time on those church things.

What about me and the children? You don't need to be quite so serious about it, is there? Surely, you really always have to be going to that prayer meeting? Surely God wants you to spend some quality time with us too.

[ 15 : 48 ] You can just hear it, can't you? It all seems very reasonable. It's just, just looking for a very reasonable and fair compromise. Or maybe things are going well in the family business.

And your wife or your husband is saying, look, what about that holiday cottage? We can afford it now, can't we? We can get away sometimes at weekends. I know you like going to church and so on, but we don't have to miss it every week, just be sometimes. And you're there most of the time.

Of course, you know where it's really going to end up, don't you? It ends up, verse 7 says, being dragged into worshipping the gods of the people around you, whether from nearby or from the very ends of the earth.

Well, you see, we live in a global village now, don't we? All the gods of the world are right at our doorstep. Every idol, every possible satisfaction. Just take one, just take sport, for example.

Sport is one of the greatest and most universal idols of our modern world, isn't it? It was Bill Shankly, wasn't it? The famous football manager all those years ago who observed that about football.

[ 16 : 53 ]    Somebody said to him, it's like a religion, isn't it? He said, no, no, no. It's far more important than that. That's true, isn't it? Maybe some of you are old firm nutcases, I don't know.

But I watched the Celtic fans, the Rangers fans, charging all around the world in vast numbers, spending huge amounts of money, not to get to the game, just to get to the city that the game is going to be held in.

The dedication of sports fans is quite extraordinary. If the Christian church had a fraction of that kind of loyalty, a fraction of that kind of willingness to part with cash for the cause, well, we'd have permanent revival, wouldn't we?

Well, it's funny, but it's serious too, isn't it? And we're surrounded by endless sports today. You can have everything you want, every variety, every continent. I was just listening this morning to the new Indian 2020 cricket leagues that everybody's making huge amounts of money in.

Then there's the Formula One, there's the Euro football championships just now, there's Wimbledon about to start, there's any number of things. And do you know what? Sport is a very, very powerful lure to idolatry.

[ 18 : 02 ]    Not that I'm against sport, I enjoy sport as much as anybody else, but I'll tell you this, I have seen Christian families and children ruined by worship of sport.

I've seen parents whose desire for the sporting progress of their children is way, way ahead of their desire for the spiritual progress of their children. And of course today so much sport is on Sundays, isn't it?

And little by little that means that God's worship is squeezed out for the great idol of the ball or the bike or the bat or whatever it is. That's just one example of many, many, many idols of the people of the world around us.

And slowly but surely and very subtly, many, many a Christian believer has been lured away by the enticement of close affection, their close family, their closest friends to other things.

Whether it's pursuing career gains or weekending away or pursuing sport or gardening or whatever else it might be. I have a minister friend who's in Vancouver in Canada and he said to me that the idol of skiing does more damage there to the church than anybody else because people go to a wonderful city like Vancouver, it's a beautiful place apparently, it's got everything and of course it's got Whistler and these other marvellous skiing resorts.

[ 19 : 29 ]    And people get into a culture of weekend skiing so they work all week, they zip off and they ski all weekend and they miss church and it's so good that well it just won't matter if we do it again next week and then we'll go to church the week after and they do but then the next week they're back skiing and it's an addiction.

And God knows that. And God knows how these things start in our lives and he knows where they're going to lead and that's why verse 9 is so stark.

It's awful isn't it? But you shall kill him. Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death. It's very stark but it's very clear isn't it?

What's it saying? God must come first. Verses 9 and 10 are shocking verses. You shall stone him to death. But you know what's even more shocking?

It's when you realize that these are exactly the words that give Jesus his language when he talks to us about what it means to follow him. Listen.

[ 20 : 36 ] Unless you hate your father or mother or wife or children or brothers you cannot be my disciple. Luke 14, 26. Matthew 10, 37.

Whoever loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. It's just as clear isn't it? He's saying the same thing. Nothing, not even our closest and dearest can be allowed to lead us away from the worship of the Lord Jesus Christ into idolatry.

Paul says exactly the same. Colossians 3 and 5. Put to death therefore whatever is earthly in you which is idolatry. You see, flee idolatry because it's deadly.

It draws you away says verse 10 from the Lord your God who alone is the one who truly saves you from slavery. You see, it's the kind of thing that loses you your savior and loses you therefore your salvation.

So the Bible says to us friends as Christians today we've got to be realists. especially in the realm of our closest affection and our ties of love.

[ 21 : 47 ] That's why Paul says to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 6 don't be unequally yoked together with an unbeliever. Why? Because somebody like that that you are deeply intimate will be a powerful, powerful lure to idolatry.

Be warned. It will not be different for you. You always think that. Don't think that. I've seen too many people lured away from Jesus Christ just that way and they thought they would be the exception but they never are.

And just as much by the worship of family and children and marriage, all of these things can be made the thing that really matters in your life, the real goal, the real purpose.

These relationships, although they're precious and right, they can become the focus of all our energy and ambition in such a way that they become our gods. It's a hard warning this, isn't it?

But it's essential because we're so easily deceived and because the world around us is so seductive. Remember, Paul says, they've been fools.

[ 22 : 59 ] Their thinking is futile. They're not wise and clever. They're slaves to worthless idols, dangerous idols. Put to death whatever is earthly in you, which is idolatry.

That's what verse 8 means. Just look at the words there again. No yielding. No listening. No pity. No sparing. No hiding the truth.

None of that. Only total rejection of every snare, every lure. everything that would cause us to abandon our true God and Savior. Well, it's very tough, isn't it?

But maybe it is a personal word to somebody here today. Maybe you know that there's a deep relationship in your life that's doing just that right at this very moment, pulling you away from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Don't let it. Don't rationalize it. Don't tell yourself that you'll be able to handle it. Trust Jesus. He knows that you won't. He wants your heart reserved for him alone.

[ 24 : 08 ] He's jealous for you, but he is so just because he loves you so much. He doesn't want to share you with anyone else or anything else. You don't want to betray him, do you?

You know that as we sang, his love truly does surpass everything else. knowing Jesus, there is no greater thing. So the Bible says, love him only.

Flee. Flee from idolatry. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we acknowledge before you that our hearts are so weak and we're so open to the lures that come from the world and especially when they come through those that we love deeply and care for.

Help us, we pray, to love them and to care for them, but never to do so in such a way that draws us away from the true love of our lives, which is you.

Help us to understand that we will love them properly and wonderfully, only if our love for you is pure, and therefore our love for them can be equally pure.

[ 25 : 20 ] So help us, we pray, to flee from idolatry, to flee into your arms of love. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.