

3. Flee Idolatry!: The lure of a progressive society

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[0 : 00] to the passage we read in Deuteronomy chapter 13, which is all about the lure of what you might call a progressive society.

That's our third study on this chapter in Deuteronomy 13, which is all about powerful lures to idolatry, to false worship, to abandonment of the one true God, the God of Scripture, the God who is made known fully and finally in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And it is an ancient chapter. It was written to God's people in Moses' day. But our text for these three studies has been a New Testament text, 1 Corinthians chapter 10, verse 14.

Therefore, my beloved, flee idolatry. So, Paul obviously is just as concerned as Moses was about this issue of idolatry.

And indeed, Paul directs us back to Moses' time and to Moses' words, so that we as New Testament Christians, we will learn not to fall into the same sins as they did.

[1 : 21] A striking thing, isn't it, that in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul tells us plainly that we are as vulnerable as they were. We might not like to think that, but if you read 1 Corinthians 10, that is what Paul says.

We are exactly the same. And so we need today the same warnings that God's people needed under Moses and have always needed. Flee from idolatry.

Again, remember we've seen that idolatry is often very subtle. That's the whole point. You don't see it coming. That's why we need to be warned. It doesn't come along, carrying a great big billboard saying, this way to apostasy.

Well, of course not. It's subtle and it's deceptive because that is the very nature, that's the very heart of sin. That's the form of the author of sin, that ancient serpent.

He's the inventor of idolatry. And he peddles his wares always in a very skillful way. We hardly notice what's going on as we're being led into idolatry.

[2 : 27] And yet actually what is happening is the whole world is being turned upside down. as we do that. Remember last time we looked at it in Romans chapter 1.

That's how Paul puts it. They, that's us, human beings, exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the created thing instead of the creator.

Total reversal of life and the universe and everything. And yet so often we don't realize it. The whole human race has utterly reversed the entire order of creation and hasn't noticed it.

Don't you think that's staggering? It's extraordinary. It's actually just as if we'd all started walking upside down and nobody had noticed as though there was anything strange going on at all.

We're not aware of it. Paul says, they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkening.

[3 : 29] Claiming to be wise, they became fools. Fools because we have deceived ourselves, says Paul, into thinking that we can live for ourselves and by ourselves. We reject God and instead of loving him and worshipping him as the one who is the true source of all our joy, all our fulfilment, all our satisfaction.

We seek all of that. We seek what is ultimate, what we are made for, but we seek it in what is merely passing, what is just part of this created universe.

Absolutely preposterous. But we're foolish and we've deceived ourselves, says the Bible, into thinking that mere creative things can be our fulfilment, can be our salvation.

But in fact, what's happened is we've enslaved ourselves. We find that these things that we worship and seek our salvation in and seek our significance and our fulfilment from, whether it's our relationships or our possessions or our careers or our learning or wealth, whatever it is, we find that these things, instead of becoming our saviors, become our masters.

They become our gods. And the truth is that they are gods who will never ever give us the salvation that we're seeking. But what they will do is lead us into slavery.

[5 : 02] We become ruled by them because we've made our lives dependent on them. We've staked everything on them. But that's absolutely foolish, isn't it, when you think about it?

To look to a mere created thing, a passing thing in this world to be our saviour, to be our future, instead of looking to the God who created all created things, including ourselves. But that is what human beings have always done and are still doing today, all the time.

So let's take one example of the folly of idolatry. And it's something very obvious in our current economic crisis.

Take the housing market. Now over the last decade, or perhaps two decades, people on both sides of the Atlantic, vast numbers of people, have been lured, haven't they, into seeing property, not just as something to give a roof over your head, not to give a home, but to be their saviour, to be their great stake for the future.

And they've been lured by foolish governments who have stoked up this particular idolatry by printing money and by pumping the world full of easy credit so that everybody can borrow far more money than they ought to be able to and have encouraged debt as a way of life.

[6 : 23] And people have seen their house prices rocket, haven't they? And they've started to believe that here is the great new salvation. They've seen property prices soar and they've all jumped on the bandwagon.

They've said, well, it's going to be my pension. I'll invest in property. It's my future. It's my prosperity. And foolishly, far, far too many people have borrowed huge amounts of money way beyond their means to buy property.

And then when it soared up in price, they borrowed even more money that they don't have against the apparent rise in those property prices. And they put their trust in the apparent ever and onward upward march of the value of these assets and staked their entire future, haven't they, on their house or their houses.

But what did we see a couple of years ago? Well, oh dear, these great new gods seem to be very, very much more fragile than we thought. the panic of the subprime crisis erupted across the Atlantic and spread its contagion across the globe.

And so much of what we took for granted and where we were putting our trust and our prosperity and our future has all come crashing down to the ground. And you and I and our compatriots in this world are going to spend the next 10 or 20 years paying the price of it, aren't we?

[7 : 48] The budget just this last week is the first taste of that rather bitter medicine. But meanwhile, the world's politicians are desperately trying to prop up these gods all over again, aren't they?

Trying to reinflate the egos of these things that we're worshipping by reinflating the economies. Our governments and our economists and people around the world are trying desperately to prop up these gods again.

To comfort the worshippers of these gods. To strengthen their faith again and the power of our houses or our assets or whatever it is to save us in the future. It's uncannily like what you read in 1 Samuel chapter 5, isn't it?

When the god Dagon, do you remember the Philistine Dagon fell flat on his face before the Ark of the Covenant and instead of coming in and saying, oh my goodness, we've been worshipping a god that is nothing, what do they do?

They start to stick it all together again with Araldite and put it back up on its plinth and say, let's worship great Dagon again. That's what you read about every day today when you read the newspapers in terms of what's going on in our current economic climate.

[8 : 58] Sticking back together the gods of materialism so that we can start to worship them again. Claiming to be wise, says Paul, they became fools.

That's just one example, just one among many, of the endemic propensity to idols that there are in the human heart. And that penetrates every single human culture and therefore it endangers every single Christian believer and every single Christian church.

Idolatry, faith in the things of this world to give us what only the true creator God can give. And that's why Paul has to write to the New Testament church in Corinth, flee idolatry.

And that's why Deuteronomy chapter 13 is in our Bible too. So let's just look there at the text that we read, verses 12 to the end of Deuteronomy 13, and unmask some of these lures to false worship that we need to be alert to.

As I said, in the first five verses we saw the lure of the spectacular and the successful, the impressive and dazzling thing in the church that's new and seems to be really impressive but actually leads people away from the true gospel and from the true God.

[10 : 19] Remember we saw the hallmarks of all of those movements, verse 5. They reject the true redemption of God, that is, in our terms, the work of the cross, and they reject the true rule of God, that is, the call to live in the way of the cross.

And there's plenty of that around today in spectacular and exciting new movements that are seeking to claim the heart of the Christian church. Just one example is the so-called emerging church movement and it's very striking that two of the things that characterize that movement most is a moving away from the biblical doctrine of the cross, from the doctrine of the atonement, and a moving away from the way of the cross, particularly in the form of sexual morality.

But so it's always been. And we saw last time the powerful lure of our closest earthly affections, the pull of a family, of spouses, of loved ones who entice us in secret.

We don't notice it. Maybe they don't realize it. But it is the relentless pull of these relationships and their demands ahead of the devotion of our hearts to the one true God.

And verse 10 we saw was very vicious, wasn't it? Stoning to death all such desires. Of course, we saw that Jesus himself is just as vicious.

[11 : 44] Unless we hate father and mother and brother and wife and children, said Jesus, we're not worthy of him. Nothing, said Jesus, and no one can dethrone God as Lord over our lives.

And any attempt to do that, however powerful that relationship may be, it must be put down with brutal force or else our salvation is in jeopardy.

Our eternity is in jeopardy. That's why it's so serious. And Jesus is very, very black and white, isn't he? No shades of grey at all. But here now in verse 12 to the end we come across a third lure which is also a very powerful one and this time it is the lure of a progressive society.

This isn't just the secret enticement of the nearest and dearest, this is the force of numbers. Look at verse 13. All inhabitants of the city, the whole community has been drawn away into a different way of thinking.

You see, every society, every culture has its own corporate idols, the god of the day, gods who are celebrated and promoted. I was interested when I was in India last year when travelling, what you saw in different parts as you travelled through North India was that different gods had a very special place.

[13 : 10] So, in one place you would go through all the statues were devoted to the Hindu god Ram and then you go a bit further on to another community and you'd find all the statues were devoted to the Hindu god Shiva and so on.

Corporate community idols, cultural idols. But it's just the same in our western secular culture. I guess we live in an era of change and transition now, don't we?

The modern age, the modernist age is passing, the age that idolized human reason and rationality and science and so on. Now, there are still people like that. That would be represented by somebody like Richard Dawkins and so on.

But increasingly today, the idols of our culture are much more relativism and autonomy and self-determination. We want to do things our way. We idolize our right to have personal choice.

That's a great mantra of our politicians. They, of course, climb on the bandwagon of the popular idols of the day and want to offer those to the people. That's how you get elected. So it's all about choice.

[14 : 19] We want freedom of choice for our schools, for our hospitals, for our institutions and so on. Freedom of choice in every way. We want freedom of choice for our lifestyles, for our bodies. So recent debates about embryo research and lowering the abortion age and so on.

We have loud voices, don't we? Pro-choice. It's the same with sexual preferences. It's my choice. It's my choice and my preference to behave the way that I want and nobody else's business.

It's even apparently our right nowadays increasingly to choose what is impossible. We want it to be our right to have children without a heterosexual relationship, without even any relationship at all.

Because science and medical science, by the way, which is paid for by the state and with our taxes over which we do not have any choice, they're increasingly being used to provide people with choice because we must have choice.

It's obvious, isn't it, that in our society if the reigning gods are relativism and autonomy, personal choice, personal decision, if those are the reigning gods in our culture today, then there can be no room, can there, for a theology of uniqueness that says there is one true God and one alone, or a theology of authority that says there is one true and unique revelation of this God in Scripture, that that is truth and that that alone is truth.

[16 : 00] You see, the one thing our so-called tolerant society simply cannot tolerate is that view. They don't tolerate anything else but that because it strikes at the very heart of the idolatry of our age.

And force of numbers is very hard to resist. When the whole city thinks something, then it's very, very hard to be against the grain, isn't it? And it's very pressing on the church and the social argument is very, very persuasive.

It's great respectability, doesn't it, when the whole culture speaks with one voice against the truth of God? Nobody thinks like that nowadays, people say. No one believes that anymore.

Well, it's very, very hard, isn't it, to be the one who believes that still. I remember watching a recent, well, it was a little while ago, edition of Question Time on the BBC and the issue of homosexual practice came up.

And only one panelist of the five dared to say that they agreed with the Christian view, the Bible's view. And when they said their piece very gently and calmly, the whole audience broke out in booing.

[17 : 17] The whole society says, no, no, no, no, this isn't idolatry, it's not sin, this is culture, this is progress, this is development, this is sophistication, we can't go back to these dark ages.

The whole city, city. And that's our world. And inevitably, when that is the world that we live in, that is going to be a powerful lure, powerful influence on the church.

You just hear the Israelite theologians, can't you, speaking about this. Well, of course, they said, now, we've been in this land for a long time and therefore, inevitably, there's been progress, we've moved on.

Of course, we look back to the days of Moses and we're so so grateful for the influence of Moses and his gospel in our lives. And yet, I remember going to hear him way, way back years ago at the Kelvin Hall in Kadesh.

And I remember those days and I thank God for them. But you see, in my journey with God, I've moved a long way now. I've matured in my faith.

[18 : 25] Because, you see, we've been in the land now for a long time. We've had wonderful insights from the richness of the temple sex culture in Canaan, for example. All kinds of other things.

And the contemporary insights that we've gained from all of these other faith traditions we've been exposed to, you see, they've so enriched our understanding of God. And we've moved on and we've just had to leave behind that narrowness of the past.

We used to call those sorts of things idolatry. Rather ashamed of that now. You see, now we see the valuable insights that they have to offer. We've engaged with modern Canaanite scholarship.

We've seen how vital it is to have visual things and sensory things in our worship. These are the things that are so important to engage people in a Pomo world, a post-Moses world.

You see, there's a very familiar ring about it, isn't there? Nothing changes. How often I've heard that kind of thing today exactly from once evangelical churchmen and theologians.

[19 : 31] Oh yes, we're very, very grateful for our past influences, Billy Graham and the like. But we've moved on. And what has happened is that the culture of the whole city has lured them by the power of a progressive society, by sheer force of numbers, by pressure to conform to this world.

But notice what verse 13 says in our chapter. It's interesting, isn't it, how the world, by the way, monopolizes all the nice language.

Liberal and progressive and tolerant and inclusive. As if any other view was backward and bigoted and intolerant and racist and sexist and all those sorts of things.

It's interesting, isn't it, when you listen to the television or the radio, even on religious programming, the person who's invited on to take the Bible's position is always called a hardliner. They're never described as somebody with firm convictions.

They're never described as somebody who's honorably consistent in their view. A hardliner or a right winger or something like that. But look at verse 13.

[20 : 50] It's very clear, isn't it? about the reality of those who lure culture away from God's truth. God does not call them liberals or progressives. He calls them, in our version, worthless fellows or in the NIV, wicked men.

And what God is telling us is that we must not be cowed by the sheer pressure of a so-called progressive or secular society so that we're taken in by what God calls wickedness.

So that we might welcome things as though they were helpfully progressive for the church that God calls sin and an abomination. That's what he calls them, verse 14, do you see?

An abomination has been done among you. And it must be utterly rejected by God's people, he says, and ejected from the church.

That language there in verse 15, you shall surely put the inhabitants to the sword, devoting it to destruction, is very, very strong language.

[21 : 57] It's the same language that God used of wiping out totally the evil Amorite nations that he was purging out of that land because of their sin. And here he's using it of God's own people, part of the community of faith.

What he's saying is that the warning for God's people is very, very stark. Don't presume, he says, that just because you're Israelites or just because you're Christians, you're somehow immune from God's judgment here.

What matters is real and true ongoing devotion to the living God, to the one true God, to worshipping him his way. Anything else than that says God is apostasy.

And that, you know, is exactly the point that Paul makes when he writes to the church in Corinth, as we read. These things, he says, were written for instruction for the New Testament church.

And he says, therefore, if any of you think you're standing firm, take heed lest you fall. You face exactly the same temptations today, he says, as they faced then and as humans have always faced.

[23 : 05] So flee from idolatry. And flee from sexual immorality, he says in 1 Corinthians 6, verse 18. It's interesting that the two times he uses that word flee in that book, it's those things, idolatry and sexual immorality.

And of course, those two things are so closely related together always, aren't they? In the scriptures and in life. In fact, it's instructive for us, if you would turn with me to 1 Corinthians 5 and that passage that we read together, it's instructive to see just how Paul applies the language of Deuteronomy chapter 13 to the New Testament church.

He's speaking to the church where the whole church community has been deeply affected by the beliefs and the practices of the pagan world all round about it. In fact, in some ways, he's saying the church is actually leading the vanguard of a progressive sexuality.

Verse 1, there's a case of incest and yet instead of being ashamed, they're actually proud. They're proud of that situation and they're saying the church here is taking a lead. Look at us. Now, no doubt they would have said to Paul, oh, but Paul, it's a committed loving relationship.

How can that possibly be wrong? Surely, the Christian faith is all about love. And Paul says, yes, it is all about love and that is why, therefore, there must be discipline.

[24 : 28] We don't love a child, do we, by just letting it do absolutely everything it wants. So recklessly that it destroys its own health.

Of course we don't. Well, you don't love a Christian or a church either by letting it do that and destroy itself. No, verse 2 says, let him who has done this be removed from among you.

When the church acts in discipline that way, says Paul, it is with the full authority of Jesus and his apostles, as verses 3 and 4 say. Paul's not there, but he is there in spirit through his words, which are his apostolic authority.

And he says the Lord Jesus is present in power in the same way. And with all his authority, the church, he says, must act to expel that falsehood, to remove from fellowship and from influence, someone who is so clearly poisoning the body of Christ.

It's frank language, isn't it, in verse 5. Deliver this man to Satan. That means is just the same as what it says in verse 2. Remove him from among you.

[25 : 40] Remove him from the realm of the church, from the realm of grace, and cast him out into the domain of Satan, outside. Because that kind of behavior belongs not in God's household, but in the place of his enemy.

Notice the reason, by the way, for this godly discipline. It's twofold, says Paul. First of all, in verse 5b at the end, it's that his spirit may be saved, he says, in the day of the Lord.

That is the day of judgment. The ultimate aim of discipline is not punitive, but it's restorative. It's to lead to repentance. But you see, it stands to reason, doesn't it, that there can't be repentance unless he recognizes he needs to repent because his action is sin.

And therefore, the loving thing for the church to do is never to pretend that sin is not sin. The loving thing for the church to do is to be clear about sin, because unless that is made clear, then the sinner will not repent and be saved.

Whereas to hide sin, to ignore sin, to call something not sin, that is sin, may leave somebody unrepentant and facing the judgment of God on the last day.

[26 : 54] So to expose sin in the church like that, Paul says, is the only loving thing, the only merciful thing that the church can do. And that's the first reason, Paul says, there must be discipline.

It leads to repentance, to the saving of the sinner. But the second is simply realism. It will save the church. You see, verses 6 to 8 tell us plainly that unless the church is serious about sin, the leaven of sin will infect the whole lump and destroy the church.

Don't you know a little leaven affects the whole lump, says Paul? But no. We are those, he says, who have been cleansed from sin. We've been rescued, as verse 7 says, by the blood of the Passover Lamb, Christ himself.

And we can't possibly, therefore, reject that purity. We can't possibly go back to what we've been delivered from. No, the leaven of malice and of evil, the old leaven, must be utterly cleansed and removed from Christian people and from the Christian church.

But notice also Paul's clarity and his realism. He does not mean by this that Christ's church must be removed out of the world and into a ghetto. Look at verse 10.

[28 : 13] It's not taking the church out of the world that he's talking about. It's rooting the world's ways out of the church. And that's very important. Listen to what David Jackman says on this.

Any Christian ghetto where the saints pride themselves in the avoidance of worldly behavior is bound to fall victim to the sins of arrogance, jealousy, envy, gossip and judgmentalism.

It's an observable fact that these are the most prevalent characteristics of churches which are turned in upon themselves. No, not that, says Paul.

Not escaping out of the world and judging the world. But the apostle is very plain. Verse 11. We are to judge within the church. You're not to associate with those who claim to be a brother.

That is, who claim to be Christians but denied by their actions of sexual immorality and greed and idolatry and so on. If there are those in the church, he's saying, and especially those in leadership in the church who bear the name of brother, who claim to be orthodox and Christian but whose behavior is clearly and observably opposed to the true apostolic gospel, then the answer is very, very clear.

[29 : 34] Verse 13. Purge the evil person from among you. That is a direct quote from Deuteronomy 13 and verse 5. David Jackman comments very helpfully again.

Withdrawal of table fellowship and other forms of social fellowship may be the most loving response that can be made in view of the eternal dangers involved. The standards of the New Testament church cannot be any lower than those expounded in the law of Moses.

A serious view of sin that will not tolerate a compromised message or a compromised church is a clear demonstration of an underlying love for God and a love for our neighbor.

It's tough love. That's true. But it's real love to take sin seriously. To resist the powerful lures to all kinds of idolatry that so easily infiltrate and infect the church from a progressively pagan society all around about us.

And church leaders especially have a great responsibility not to dodge that kind of discipline. However hard it is, however unpopular it makes them and unpopular it will undoubtedly make them.

[30 : 56] If all the society says something different. Paul's very plain about that isn't he in the pastoral epistles. Some of us were looking at those last week in our Servants of the Word conference with Dick Lucas.

Paul commands Timothy and Titus to guarantee that the apostles' teaching remains intact in the church in their day. That is their job, he says.

For, he says in Titus 1, there are many who do not submit to the apostles' truth. Empty talkers and deceivers, they must be silenced, he says, because they are upsetting whole households, whole churches, by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach.

Listen, they profess to know God, says Paul, but they deny him by their works. They're detestable, he says, an abomination, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

That's Paul, Christ's apostle. He's not mincing his words, is he? In fact, he gets them precisely from Moses in this chapter that we're reading. They're not progressives, but they are worthless wicked men, says Deuteronomy 13, verse 13.

[32 : 12] What they do is not hip and cool and culturally sensitive, verse 14. It is an abomination to the Lord. You see, people haven't changed, have they?

People haven't changed from the plains of Moab to the land of Israel, to the city of Corinth, or to the city of Glasgow in the 21st century. People and people's hearts are just the same.

And God and God's heart is just the same. We face the same temptations today, says Paul, that are common to all people.

The same powerful lures to rejecting God's ways, to turning to our own ways, to serving our own gods. We face just the same sex gods and goddesses of our contemporary world.

We face many competing ideologies and fashions and aspirations, the so-called freedoms, the so-called fulfillments that people chase and offer.

[33 : 21] We face them everywhere in our cities today and have drawn away with them all the inhabitants of our cities today. And that's why God gives exactly the same warning to us.

Flee idolatry. So when today theologians or pressure groups within the church, by sheer force of numbers, and by the pressures from a progressive society and a pluralistic society, when they say, no, no, we must play down the uniqueness of Christ alone as Savior, lest we offend other cultures or religions.

Or when they say, we must change our stance on sexual morality, for example, from the Bible, because nobody lives like that anymore and no one believes that anymore and no one will listen to us if we don't agree with them.

When people say that, Moses says to us, and Paul says to us, as Christ's apostles, flee from idolatry. Beware, call it what it is.

It is not progress. It's wickedness. It's not avant-garde, says the Lord God. It's an abomination. See, what he's saying is that there are some things that God's people simply cannot have anything to do with.

[34 : 42] And our message, therefore, can never be to affirm lifestyles of idolatry and wickedness. Our gospel must be the gospel that was preached on the day of Pentecost. Save yourself from this corrupt generation.

Notice verse 17. It's very striking, isn't it? None of the devoted things shall stick to your hand. That the Lord may turn from the fierceness of his anger and show you mercy and compassion and multiply you.

God's mercy and God's compassion comes to us, and it does come to us, but it comes through a turning away of his fierce anger. We're either under one or the other, either under his anger or his compassion and his mercy.

There's no cheap grace. You can't have the mercy of God, says Moses, and have the things of idolatry still sticking to your hands.

None of these things must stick to your hands. You can't have both worlds. You can't have one and the other. It's either or. So says verse 18, you must get away from all of that and obey the voice of the Lord your God alone.

[36 : 01] That's fleeing idolatry. So friends, what these three weeks looking at this chapter have taught us is this, at the heart of the biblical faith, according to the Lord Jesus Christ, is the great commandment.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and your mind and your strength. That's the consistent message of the Bible. I, the Lord, am your God and there is no other.

Beside me there is no God. To me every knee will bow and every tongue shall swear allegiance, says the Lord. And God has exalted Jesus Christ our Lord that his name and to his name alone should every knee bow.

And so the Bible warns us, don't be lured away from him by idolatry, by anything or by anyone. Not by the spectacular spiritualities that seem to be so successful in our day and there are many.

Not even by the closest affections of our hearts and they can be very, very powerful. Nor by the pressure of our progressive but worthless culture and it is everywhere around us saturating us all the time.

[37 : 33] No, says the New Testament in Colossians 3, put to death whatever is earthly in you which is idolatry. And know this, it's because of these things that the wrath of God is coming.

Flee therefore from idolatry. Flee from idolatry and love the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul and with all your strength.

These things happen, says Paul, of all that we've read in the Old Testament but were written down for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, flee from idolatry and flee back into the only safe place, into the arms of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Friends, I don't know your hearts this morning but I know my own heart and if you're like me you also know that you need that warning. It may be that you know even now as you're sitting here that there is something that you have been giving your life to that has been, if you're honest, drawing your way from that exclusive love and devotion to Jesus Christ to which you are called, which he longs for you to know again.

The Lord Jesus is here with all his power. The apostle is here in spirit by his words. He's calling to you and he's calling to me.

[39 : 15] There is another way. He does provide a way out. This temptation is not such as you cannot resist. that you must turn and flee.

And when you do you will find that his arms are open and that his compassion and his mercy that he swore to give you will overtake you and enfold you as you obey the voice of the Lord your God.

Let's pray. Lord, we are weak and often tempted but you are strong and you promise to give us strength.

So help us, we pray, to love you and to serve you now and to the very end the sake of your great love for us and for the glory of your great name.

Amen. Amen.