

CONFRONTING IDOLS OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

INTRODUCTION

Acts 17:16 ~ “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was observing the city full of idols.”

- Oftentimes when you travel to faraway places you tend to notice differences in culture and even sin that seems prevalent in another culture. As you become more perceptive, you may even realize the idols in your own culture. Likewise, we hope that in our very own culture or subculture around us we can clearly discern what is idolatrous.
- Like Paul did in Athens, our response should be declaring the truth (17:17), and awareness of our culture so we can reply to the philosophy they idealize with the truth of God’s Word (17:18,22).¹

IDOLATRY:

- Technically, idolatry “refers to the worship of an image or figure considered a representation or copy of a deity. Due to Yahweh’s prohibition of images, the worship of any image was worship of a god other than Yahweh—an act that amounted to rejection of and rebellion against the only true God.”²
- But we should also remember that God looks at the heart and he knows what people build in their hearts that grow to a greater value and love than glory of God.
- Scripture is so clear on idolatry that it rarely mentions them in a matter-of-fact way, except for what they are made of. Rather, the biblical discourse on idolatry is harshly negative.
- God takes sin very seriously and he despises anything that takes steals His glory in the heart of man.

Have no other gods and fear the Lord, the true God

Jeremiah 10:1–8

- God demands such exclusive worship that he dedicated the first two commandments to dealing with false worship of gods and idols.

Exodus 20:3-6 ~ “You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.”

¹ Refer to the mbcmi.org resource page for weeks 2 and 3 of Truth for Troubling Times “Cultural Engagement and the Weapons of Our Warfare,” and “Building Biblical Convictions and Responding Godly”.

² Douglas Mangum, “[Idolatry](#),” ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, Lexham Bible Reference Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).

- But today, we don't generally drive around our neighborhoods seeing people bowing down to molten images of gold or metal. Contemporary idolatry takes on different forms. "Today, many have replaced the "golden calf" with an insatiable drive for money or prestige or "success" in the eyes of the world. Some pursue the high regard of others as their ultimate goal. Some seek after comfort or a myriad of other passionate, yet empty, pursuits. Sadly, our societies often admire those serving such idols. In the end, however, it doesn't matter what empty pleasure we chase after or what idol or which false god we bow down to; the result is the same—separation from the one true God.³"
- Let's just take a minute to brainstorm some of other the categories of life that can take over our hearts: possessions, careers, relationships, image, hobbies, sports, movies, entertainment, goals, greed, addictions to alcohol/drugs/gambling/pornography, etc., even ministry, giving to charity, or family.
- Not all of these are even bad, but all of them are capable of becoming the replacement god in our heart, even for just a moment.

The Source of our Idolatry

Ezekiel 14:1-11

- The idols were set up in their heart. Over time something took the place of God and had a permanent dwelling place in their lives! The verb "to set up" is the same used in Daniel 3 of Nebuchadnezzar's 90-foot statue which he set up. God doesn't distinguish between the 900-foot-tall idol we set up in our heart and something made with hands.
- Verse 4 and 7 say the reality of the idol is up in their face and a stumbling block of their iniquity.
- The Lord tells Ezekiel in verse 5 that he wants their hearts. He wants them to pursue Him again.
- Verse 6 makes it clear the way to deal with idols is repentance. Turn away from idols and *all your abominations* and serve God.

The Thessalonians were commended for their repentance in **1 Thessalonians 1:9**, "For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God,"

- Verse 7: The idols of our heart separate us from God.
- And in verses 8-10 God makes it clear that those who separate themselves from Him will likewise be cut off from the people and He will stretch out his hand against them and destroy them from among the people of Israel. These are serious indictments.
- We would do well to take idols that creep up in our heart just as seriously.

Deuteronomy 12:3 ~ "You shall tear down their altars and smash their sacred pillars and burn their Asherim with fire, and you shall cut down the engraved images of their gods and obliterate their name from that place."

Romans 8:11 ~ "for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

³ "Why is idol worship such a powerful temptation?" <https://www.gotquestions.org/idol-worship.html>

- Practically, we smash the idols, we put to death the deeds of the flesh by prayer, by extreme action to cut out the sin, by dwelling on Christ (Colossians 3:15-16), growing in the knowledge of God (Colossians 1:9-10), and growing in those virtues (Ephesians 4, Colossians 3) which set us free from besetting sins.

ORIGIN OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

James Truslow Adams, in his book *The Epic of America* (1931) wrote that the American dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."

- This is where the phrase comes from, but the sentiments of the American Dream were already considered somewhat foundational in our Declaration of Independence:
 - “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”
- The American dream is something Europeans today cite frequently as a synonym for “living the good life” or achieving levels of financial success and lifestyle security.
- “Living the dream” is a phrase people often use to describe their found happiness, moderate comfort and security with a promising future in view.
- The national ethos of our country is encapsulated by this set of ideals, namely democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity, and equality which warrant opportunities for success and prosperity and upward social movement. Historically, this is achieved through hard work without barriers to keep all citizens from pursuing these ideals.
- But in recent generations, it is becoming more and more apparent that democracy and rights and liberty and opportunity, and equality are misunderstood and abused among believers, setting up idols of the heart.

CITIZEN RIGHTS AND CHRISTIAN RIGHTS

- The Bill of Rights is a great document that has benefited our nation for two and a half centuries. The benefits of living in this country have been favorable for Christians and the personal liberties we have as citizens is just wonderful.
- But nowhere in Scripture is it stated that we should expect that regardless of where we live or what time period we find ourselves that religious freedoms should be entitled to us. On the contrary, we were promised by nearly all of the New Testament writers that we should expect trials and persecution and to stand firm and bear witness (Matthew 10:16-18; John 15:18ff; 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4; 1 Peter 4:12-14).

- We cannot replace the rights we are promised as citizens of Heaven for the Bill of Rights or any other manmade promises. We should first look to our Bibles for what we are entitled to as citizens of the King of Kings before assuming the Bill of Rights will result in our best life now as Americans.

How did Jesus teach his disciples to live in the world as dual citizens?

Luke 6:27–31 ~ “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. “Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. “Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. “Treat others the same way you want them to treat you.”

Here are 8 rights Jesus promised his followers in the context of a zealously nationalistic Jewish audience hoping for changes in government and policy:⁴

1. You have the right to love those who disagree with you (27a).
2. You have the right to serve those who hate you (27b).
3. You have the right to be gracious to those who curse you (28a).
4. You have the right to pray for those who hurt you (28b).
5. You have the right to refuse taking revenge (29a).
6. You have the right to be robbed of personal possessions (29b).
7. You have the right to be generous to those who don’t pay you back (30).
8. You have the right to never see, in your lifetime, many of your wishes come true (31).

Laying down our American Rights

- So then, are we prepared, as Jesus taught to actively sacrifice much for others and do good to hostile people?
- Are we prepared as citizens of heaven above to graciously bless those who might even damn us and then pray for them?
- Can we refuse revenge verbally or physically in order to be vindicated only by God rather than man?
- Concerning our possessions, can we be content to never actually own anything (as God’s stewards of all he has given us) and have an attitude of holding our possessions loosely, even generously to those in our debt?
- Are we prepared to live like Christ lived? Despite how our neighbors, employers, or government decide to conduct themselves, are we ready to receive our finest, best reward in eternity if this life offers us none?

Jesus concludes with the following in **Luke 6:32-36**: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. “If you do good to those who do good to you,

⁴ Stephen Davey, “A Different Bill of Rights: Luke 6:27-36”, Wisdom from the Heart, www.wisdomonline.org.

what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. “If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”

- Certainly, like we mentioned last week, there is a place in our society to voice our objections and claim our legal rights as American citizens, but as Christian citizens, our government will not recognize our King.
- Look at verse 35: There are “sons of the Most High,” and there are “sons of this age” (Luke 16:8) or “sons of those who murdered the prophets” (Matthew 23:31). The citizens of Heaven will bear resemblance to their Heavenly Father and verse 36, our posture will be that of mercy just as our Heavenly Father.
- Our rights change when we are redeemed. We lay aside all this world has to offer and take up a cross and follow Jesus.
- It is not a burdensome journey through this life. Subtracting one set of rights has added all the spiritual benefits we need and the joy and hope of a reconciled relationship with God.

John 1:12 ~ “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”

Advancing the Right Cause:⁵

- Our country returning to its roots is not our mission. Our mission is to turn people to God.
- The mission of the church is not to convert someone to a political viewpoint... it is to make someone a Christian, a disciple who follows Jesus.
- Our goal is not to save America... our goal is to save Americans from sin and death.
- Our purpose is not to have a worthy political document that will help our cause... our purpose is to make worshipers of God.

- Stephen Davey summarizes our allegiance:

“Beloved, our mission is not to save our country any more than it is today for German Christians to save Germany or Iranian Christians to save Iran or Chinese Christians to save China. Our mission is to remind the citizens of the countries where we’ve been assigned as ambassadors, the countries that might silence us, insult us, hate us, defraud us, and persecute us: We have been assigned to remind them, with compassion and grace, of the gospel: that there is another country, there is a greater citizenship, there is a higher allegiance, there is an eternal Kingdom, and there is a coming King, to whom they must surrender, for He shall have the final word.”⁶

Paul’s Dual Citizenship:⁷

⁵ Stephen Davey, “A Different Bill of Rights: Luke 6:27-36.”

⁶ Stephen Davey, “A Different Bill of Rights: Luke 6:27-36.”

⁷ Rodney Nelson, “Christians, Citizenship, and Rights,” <https://www.libertymagazine.org/article/christians-citizenship-and-rights>

- The apostle Paul used the rights of his Roman citizenship to appeal a trial to Caesar (Acts 25:7-12), seek protection from the mob (Acts 22:25-29), be released from prison (Acts 16:37). Yet he did not take every right offered to him and even did not appeal to his Roman citizenship when he was flogged in Acts 16.
- His primary citizenship was of heaven, and as an ambassador of Christ, waived that flag every opportunity he had so that more people would become citizens of heaven.

2 Corinthians 5:20 ~ “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

- In the context of persecution, Paul tells the Philippians that all believers share a far better and more hopeful citizenship than the citizenship in this world.

Philippians 3:20 ~ “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

- That’s the goal of our life, to live for Christ, to “take hold of that for which I was even taken hold of by Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12).

AMERICAN IDOLS: PURSUIT OF GOOD THINGS OTHER THAN GOD

- We now want to turn our attention to some of the specific rights we tend to hold onto as Americans.
- We could cover this topic for a whole series, but what I want to do is give a brief overview of what the temptation is for us in thinking about these ideals, and then how Scripture appropriately says how then we should live.

Life, Comfort, Safety

- Most countries today value the sanctity of life in some respect because without living people, they won’t last long as a functioning society. In the USA, there is general sense in which we would like to not only promote life, but that all people should have a decent life.
- And to take it a step further, the temptation is that we want to have a perfect life, or a full life.
- This is usually further described by the rest of the ideals we’re talking about: Money in the bank, safety and security, freedom from all troubles, etc.
- However, the believer is promised a Spirit-filled life with the hope of eternal life and peace.

Romans 8:6 ~ “For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.”

- The believer will find the truly abundant life in Christ, not in pursuing life according to the flesh.
- The one who sets his mind on the flesh will see disappointment and finally eternal death.
- The one who sets his mind on (controlled by) the Spirit will see life in God and finally eternal peace with Him.

- John Owen says, “The mind which has been given spiritual life and light can understand spiritual things and so sets its thoughts and desires on them because **it finds great delight and satisfaction in them.**”⁸

Psalm 63:3-5 ~ Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise You. So I will bless You as long as I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, And my mouth offers praises with joyful lips.

- Let us live by faith in Christ, who now lives in us.

Freedom/Liberty

The Merriam-Webster Definition of Freedom: “(a) the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action, or (b) the liberation from slavery or restraint or from the power of another.”

- Political freedom enables freedom in a democratic society that limits constraints on the people.
- Freedom **FROM** certain negative evils such as oppression, coercion, or disabling barriers (such as economic or political).
- Freedom **UNTO** active participation in society to vote, take legal action, and freedom to speak.
- Freedom is often associated with civil liberties, human rights, and legal protection.⁹

But the problem comes when people view freedom as total exemption from something which is not burdensome.

- The freedom from responsibility: Think what you want, say what you want, do what you want.
- The freedom to rebel against all authorities and overthrow the government because our desires are being fulfilled.
- Originally, the American dream was that people could be free to own their own land and keep the fruit of their labors for themselves rather than be subject to others. We wanted some basic rights and opportunities for everyone. Now “liberty” has morphed into an individualistic freedom,¹⁰ regardless of the effect on others.

- a. *It’s my destiny.*
- b. *It’s my body.*
- c. *It’s my life.*
- d. *It’s my choice/view/perspective...*

Romans 6:20-23

⁸ John Owen, *Spiritual-Mindedness*, 3.

⁹ “Political Freedom”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_freedom.

¹⁰ Trevin Wax, “Has the American Dream Turned On Itself?” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/american-dream-turned/>.

- WE were born as slaves of sin. We were free from righteousness. We were free from God. But we were free UNTO the just penalty of death.
- We who were united in Christ and have died to sin, are free from sin (Rom 6:7) unto eternal life with God (Rom 6:22).
- There are only two options for which master we choose. Sin will have master over us (Rom 6:14), or God will be our master.
- The outcome of sin is death (Rom 6:16, 21), and the outcome of obedience is righteousness and our sanctification (Rom 6:16, 22).
- We have had an amazing benefit in this country to live in a free land, free from tyranny, free from control, restrictions, or oppression.
- But believers are not free to do whatever we want, rather we are joyfully united with Him.

Pursuit of Happiness/wellness:

- The American right to the pursuit of happiness falls under the heading of liberty. The idea is that nothing should unnecessarily impede the hard work it takes to accomplish something in our land.
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 - Two things happen:
 - Some people tend to drop the “pursuit” and expect happiness as an entitlement void of the effort it takes to accomplish a goal.
- 2 Thessalonians 2:3** ~ “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.”
- Other people tend to pursue happiness in and of itself as the goal of their life.
 - Joy found anywhere but in the Lord will be left unsatisfying.
 - Psalm 16:11 ~ “You will make known to me the way of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.

Trevin Wax:

“Happiness” referred to human flourishing, or achieving the “good life”—a life of goodness and wellbeing. Note the shades of morality included in that ancient definition. Happiness meant fulfilling one’s purpose or reaching the full potential of what a human being was created to be. Since that time, the definition of “happiness” has shed most of its moral meaning and has slipped into the pursuit of personal pleasure.”¹¹

¹¹ Ibid.

Wealth

- This is perhaps the greatest lure in the heart of man, alongside power and pleasure. The rich young ruler couldn't let go of it, Solomon couldn't get enough of it, and our American economy certainly encourages it!
- One missionary lived many years in Eastern Europe and shared an ironic statement about the lure of materialism, "Living as a Christian was easier under communism rather than capitalism. Capitalism presents too many distractions."¹²

There are four categories of people in the world:

1. Righteous rich (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who buried Jesus in John 19:37-38),
2. Righteous poor (the lame man healed in Acts 3)
3. Unrighteous rich (rich ruler in Mark 10:17-31),
4. Unrighteous poor (the poor in the many cities and towns who rejected Jesus).

1 Timothy 6:10, 17 ~ "For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs... Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy."

Hebrews 13:5 ~ "Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,"

- Wealth is not the evil, but the love of wealth or the pursuit of wealth. It ensnares people's hearts.

Psalms 62:10 ~ "Though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them".

Mark 10:25 ~ "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."

- Likewise, money can become a trap for the *poor* to fall into discontentment, covetousness, or anxiety.

Matthew 6:25 ~ "For this reason I say to you, do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is life not more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Philippians 4:10-13 ~ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along

¹² Amy Medina shared this brief story in her blog post, "This American High," *Not Home Yet*, <https://amy-medina.com/this-american-high/>.

with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

PURSUIT OF IDOLS AMONG FALSE TEACHERS

- The American Dream is not just a secular idea. It has been infused into the church through false teachers who distort the gospel to encourage people to have a long productive life full of success and
- “All the things that Jesus says we have to be willing to set aside and follow him... They take all those things and that make them the attraction of the gospel.”¹³
- These preachers wrongly teach a message of healing, power, life free from strife, a successful life. “Jesus came that we might have a more abundant life. He came to carry our weaknesses, our sickness, our pain, so that we can walk in total freedom, peace, power and purpose” (Joel Osteen from Lakewood Church’s official website).

Consider how the Beatitudes answer what the American Dream tends to make us want:

DESIRE: Matthew 6:3-12

Success?	3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Ease?	4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Demand Rights?	5 “Blessed are the gentle, for they will inherit the earth.
Satisfaction?	6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.
Rugged Individualism?	7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Freedom?	8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Riots?	9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
Safety/comfort?	10 “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Equality?	11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.
Wealth?	12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in this same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- People aren’t happy in life, they aren’t really blessed, not because they can’t catch the American Dream, but because they are seeking the things of earth.

Colossians 3:1-4 ~ “Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

¹³ Russell Berger, *American Gospel: Christ Alone*, film.