

27 February 2022

The Alternative to Idolatry

Mark 12:28-34

As we wrap up our sermon series on modern idolatry, I'd like to briefly run through where we've been. The United States has begun to follow a path that other western nations have been on for some time, and traditional religion, especially Christianity, is in steep numerical decline in our country. For the past twenty years at least, the fastest growing religious category in the US has been the "unaffiliated" or, simply, the "Nones," many of whom used to identify as Christian. But though Christianity is losing members, belief is doing fine. You see, we human beings are believers by default. We have this inherent conviction that life is not just random happenstance, but has meaning. There is a reason we are here, and we instinctively seek that purpose. This purpose is one thing that religion offers, but where do people who have abandoned their old religion find purpose? They find something else to take its place. G. K. Chesterton is supposed to have said, "When people stop believing in God, the result is not that they believe nothing, but rather that they believe anything."

And so we have spent several weeks looking at some of the "anythings" to which people have moored their rudderless boats. We've talked about Wellness Culture and the new paganism of nature-based religion, about money (of course), and even a couple of social movements that some people have made their gods: nostalgia for an imaginary past and Social Justice. I've tried to be respectful of these new religious movements, because none of these things are necessarily evil. They only become a problem when they are made into gods, because none of them are up to that task. Today, though, I want to end our sightseeing tour of what other people are believing and turn our focus back on ourselves. What does our study of modern idolatry have to say to us, the Christian Church?

It's not especially pretty. For starters, much of what I called idolatry outside the church is very much present in here, too. I talked, for instance, about America's long idolatrous affair with money, measuring the meaning of life in dollars and cents. Well, far too often so do we Christians. One of the few branches of American "Christianity" that is growing numerically is the Prosperity Gospel: the teaching that God wants to bless us with wealth, and – the corollary doctrine – that therefore the wealthy are God's favorites. This is idolatry pure and simple, a false faith in which God is not at the center but rather is just one more tool for acquiring wealth, which is the real deity. But even churches like ours that reject the Prosperity Gospel fall easily into the quasi-idolatry of measuring the health of a church by its bank account rather than its faithfulness to God or service to others. And then, of course, there's the idolatry of worshiping a rose-tinted past when everything supposedly was good. That's not just found in society as a whole, is it? Nobody does nostalgia like we do. We didn't use to, though. Back in the fifties, when we had three hundred kids in the third-grade boys' Sunday School class . . . it's an idol.

So, inside the church we are prone to some of the same idolatries as those outside the church. But now it gets worse. Some of the new religions are partly our fault. Some of them are thriving because they are doing things that we as a church should have been doing, but haven't been. One of the appeals of Wellness Culture is its challenge to grow, to improve, to become

better versions of ourselves. We don't do that much in the church. Jesus did. He was constantly challenging his disciples to grow and think and take risks. He actually drove some people away when they found out how much he expected. Meanwhile, we his supposed descendants seldom challenge anyone for fear of their being offended or even, gasp, moving their membership. We're supposed to be a spiritual health club, where people go to stretch and exercise their faith, but have become more like a spiritual hobby club where people go to hang out with those who have similar interests. Or again, as I noted a few weeks ago, our scripture commands us to care for and honor God's creation, finding God in its beauty, and serving God by tending it. But we have not done that. "Christian Environmentalism" is not a phrase that anyone is really familiar with, is it? So, as the ravages of industrialism on the earth are becoming more clear each day, it's not surprising that some people should leave us and join nature-based faiths that seem to care more about the planet.

But most discouraging of all is the rise of the aggressively secular social justice religion, because if we followers of Christ had one task, it was to show God's love to the poor, rescue the afflicted, visit the prisoner, feed the hungry, welcome the outcast, clothe the naked, and break down the barriers that keep people from the love of God. That was our job, and our failure to do it is one reason that people who long for justice have gone elsewhere. In fact, we didn't just fail to stand for justice, too often we've joined the other side. The Public Religion Research Institute did a survey a couple of years back on attitudes toward racism, asking a series of questions designed to see whether people believe that systemic racism even exists, whether racial minorities do face obstacles in society that others do not. When they compiled their results, one of the things they did was look for connections. Which people were most likely to believe that systemic racism is real, and which group is most likely to deny it. The demographic group most likely to deny the reality of racism in America was not, as you might expect, white people. It was white *Christians*. One reason that today's social justice movement has become a replacement religion for some is because many of those who long for justice see no connection between justice and the church.

Is there any good news today? I think so. The good news is that the church of Jesus Christ is not the one that people have rejected. The church that people are leaving today is the church that has slipped into idolatry, the church that has forgotten its mission to the world, the church that has grown too comfortable with its wealth and social position and has become a part of the society rather than the challenging voice of Christ. But as I look at the false gods that people are turning to instead, it looks to me as if what they are looking for is, in fact, the Church of Jesus Christ. Frederick Douglass made a distinction between the cultural church that he had known as a slave, the church that endorsed and enabled slavery and what Douglass called "the pure, peaceable, impartial Christianity of Christ." We must rediscover that Christianity again. And what is that pure Christianity that people are looking for? Let's read our scripture for today, Mark 12, verses 28-34.

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?' ²⁹ Jesus answered, 'The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." ³¹The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

There is no other commandment greater than these.’³²Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that “he is one, and besides him there is no other”;³³ and “to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength”, and “to love one’s neighbor as oneself”,—this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.’³⁴When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question.

This is our task. Love God and love our neighbors. And just to be clear, there is a correct order of operations here. Start by loving your neighbors. If we learn anything from idolatry, it’s that it’s easy to convince ourselves that loving God involves doing what we want to do. Crusaders, torturers, inquisitors, witch burners all believed they were proving their love for God. So start by loving your neighbors, and when we get good at that, we will discover a subversive little trick that God has. While we were learning to love others we were actually loving God all along, because God is love.

The practice of love has another subversive side effect, too. It also de-thrones our own ego from the altar of our hearts. Again and again through this series on idolatry we have seen that just beneath the surface, these new godless religions are, *all about me*. But love, by very definition, is all about the other. When you truly love, you cannot put yourself first. It’s a contradiction in terms. Over and over, we saw these modern idols promising that by doing this or that we could become our best selves. Christianity’s subversive promise is that when give ourselves to others, helping *them* to become their best selves, then one day we will notice that we ourselves have become a better self than we had ever dreamed of becoming. And we won’t even care, because it’s not all about us.

Finally, when we enthrone love for others in our hearts, so that that love becomes the hub of our lives, the guiding principle of our minds, the light of our eyes, then we are immune from idolatry. Money is no longer our goal, but is a useful tool by which we can pursue the goal of showing love to others. Social Justice cannot become a new fundamentalist creed to be wielded against people who disagree with you, but will remain what it should be – our method of expressing love to greater numbers of people. Idolatry is on the rise in America, but there is an alternative. The alternative, the antidote, to idolatry is love.

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A final word. Southern Baptist ethicist Russell Moore recently said this: “We used to see young people leaving the church because they could not believe what the church teaches. Now we see young people leaving the church because they don’t think the church believes what the church teaches.” But if we start to live as if we actually believe in loving God by loving our neighbors, that will change the narrative.