

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #4

“Worshipping What Is Worthless”

--CEFC 2/7/21

The Apostle John ends his first New Testament letter

with this brief but direct statement:

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” (1 John 5:21)

That’s it.

No final greetings, no good-bye--nothing--

just these words--

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”/

I suspect that most of us probably skim by that command

about as quickly as we skim by the admonition

to greet one another with a holy kiss.

There are no *idols* in our lives--

Granted, there might be certain sports figures or movie stars or entertainers

who could still be called by that name--

I think of people like . . . who?

Tim Tebow? Tom Brady? LeBron James? Brad Pitt?

Brittany Spears? or Beyoncé?

There are certain people, if they did walk in among us,

would cause most of us almost immediately to turn our heads
and cease worshipping God,
if just for a moment.

There is some of that in this celebrity culture in which we live.

I had one pastor tell me about a woman
who was going to sing a song in their worship service one summer
and to set up the song, so to speak,
she talked about how August was a particularly difficult month for her--
it was the month her mother had died, she said--
and then without hesitation,
she said that August was hard for her because
it was also the month in which Elvis Presley had passed away--she was serious!¹

But that's different, we say.

Idolatry is something we relegate to the margins of Christian experience.
It is something that only affects those in other times,
or in other cultures,
or those on the psychological extremes of life--
like people who idolize Elvis.

But not us.

Idolatry-- it's not our problem.

But, of course, it is our problem.

¹That Free Church is in Atlantic City.

John's words were addressed not to pagans,
but to Christian believers.

And if we marginalize idolatry and ignore it,
then we will very easily fail to see the idolatry in ourselves.

The idolatry John was referring to
encompasses more than we might imagine.

It includes more than merely bowing before a little statue.

Even in the New Testament itself
we see the notion of idolatry expanded
beyond the narrow confines of the worship of images
to include an attitude of greed and covetousness (cf. Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).

In its essence, you see,
an idol is any substitute and counterfeit god.

An idol is anything that takes the true God's place in our faith
and in our affections.

And these substitute and counterfeit gods
come as naturally and as easily to us
as weeds in a garden./

They come easily to us, because
as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes observed,
God has put eternity in our hearts.

God created us for a relationship with himself.
and as Augustine so eloquently put it,

“My heart is restless, Lord, until it finds its rest in you.”

We have an inner need for something outside ourselves
to give our lives significance and security.

But because sin has disrupted our relationship with the true God,
we try to fill that need in our lives with all sorts of false gods.

As I said last week, We are worshiping animals,
and G.K. Chesterton correctly perceived that when we “cease to worship God,
we do not worship nothing,
we worship anything”--
anything that can assume the role of a God-substitute.

Paul says that in our fallen condition we exchange **“the truth of God for a lie,
and worship and serve created things
rather than the Creator”** (Rom. 1:25).

And why should we exchange the truth of God for a lie?

Precisely because we are sinners.

Although we were created to live in a relationship with God,
we have rebelled against God’s right to rule over us.
Deep inside we know ourselves to be guilty of cosmic treason.
Consequently, like fugitives on the run,
we are quite reluctant to come too close to our rightful King.

Didn't Adam and Eve hide from God in the garden?

We have a need for God,

but at the same time, we have an aversion to God,

for we live in a state of moral rebellion against God.

We are attracted to him,

and we are repulsed by him at the same time.

and these two realities are joined in idolatry--

we create gods on our own terms--

meeting our needs for security or significance

without the prospect of accountability.

We want to feel God perhaps,

but deep inside we don't really want to face him.

Idols provide the benefits of beneficence

without the danger of holiness. /

And idols don't have to come as statues;

they can assume myriad forms--

for an idol is anything in creation that is inflated to function

as a substitute for God.

An idol may be something that is, in itself, perfectly harmless.

Wealth, fame, pleasure, power, politics, work, family, sports, even church--

they're all candidates--

for each of these can assume a god-like character in our hearts--

calling for an ever-increasing commitment of our lives,
and in so doing

taking the place of the one true God who alone must reign supreme.

An idol is whatever you think you must have to be happy;

something you cannot conceive not having in your life.

Idols become the source of your identity and security.

Idols can even be **mental creations**--

a conception of God "as I like to think of him"--

a God who is congenial to my own predilections of what a god should be like--

with all the rough edges smoothed off--

a god who likes the things I like,

and hates the things I hate,

and who simply wants me to have an enjoyable life.

An idol is more like a grandfather in the sky.

In recent years, I've become a grandfather.

It's a wonderful role—I have yet to change a diaper!

A grandfather isn't responsible for the discipline of the kids;

he's just concerned that at the end of the day

everyone should have had a good time.

Many people would rather have a heavenly grandfather

than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ--

the God who hates sin and who calls sinners to repentance,

a Father whose love is holy./

Idolatry comes in all sorts of forms.

So you see, when you understand idolatry in this way,

it's obvious that John's words are addressed to us

when he says, "**Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.**"

And that's why Jeremiah's words are so important to us

in this passage we've just read.

In these sixteen verses in chap. 10 we have the prophet's critique of idolatry,

which was **the central challenge to faith** among the people of his day--

and which still is in our day, too./

Jeremiah's argument takes the form of a comparison,

with the prophet alternating assertions about idols and then about God.

I've isolated five such points of contrast,

points of contrast that can be useful as we seek

to root out the idolatry in our own lives.

Please turn with me to Jer. 10--

And the first of these contrasts is perhaps the most important of them all--

I. Idols are created; God is the Creator.

Notice the way idols come into being²--s

First, people sever something from its immediate environment--

²Cf. Goudzwaard, *Idols of Our Time*, 21.

v.3 --“They cut a tree out of a forest”

Then they refashion it -- “the craftsman shapes it with his chisel.”

And then they set it up on its own in a special place--

“they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter.”

It is a created thing that has been set apart from its Creator;

cut off from its proper place in the ordering of life.

“Can’t you see,” Jeremiah says,

“These idols of yours may look impressive”--

as he says in v. 9--

with their gold and silver plating

and their purple and blue adornments--made by skilled workers--

but in the end, they are just the creation of your own human hands.

“But,” Jeremiah says in v. 12, in contrast--

“God made the earth by his power;

he founded the world by his wisdom

and stretched out the heavens by his understanding.”

v.16-- “He who is the Portion of Jacob is not like these,

for he is the Maker of all things.”

Here is the most basic and fundamental distinction of all--

God made man;

idols are man-made.

God alone is the ultimate source of all that exists--
therefore, the worship of anything other than God
is the worship of something that is less than ultimate--
a worship of the creature rather than the Creator.

And because they are mere creatures,
all these things will pass away--
v. 11--"These gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth,
will perish from the earth and from under the heavens."

But the Lord will endure forever--he alone is eternal.

Jeremiah's critique begins with this fundamental distinction--
idols are created; God alone is the Creator.

A second contrast follows very closely from this--
for in a second step in the creation of an idol,
people consecrate what they have created and bow before it,
seeing it as a thing that has power and life in itself.

But the idols made by your own hands--
they are **powerless**, the prophet says--
v.5--they cannot speak,
they cannot walk.
"they can do no harm,

nor can they do any good."

You go to them to find life,

but they are lifeless--

v. 14-- **"they have no breath in them"**

no spirit, no **Aj...wõr**--that vital, life-giving force,
that animates all living things.

Those idols you worship are **powerless**, he says.

But in contrast, as Creator, the Lord is **all-powerful**--

v. 13--**"When he thunders, the waters in the heavens roar;**

he makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth.

He sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses."

He is the living God, the eternal King--

He is all-powerful.

He is the very source of life,

breathing his life into all living things.

v. 6-- **"No one is like you, O Lord;**

you are great,

and your name is mighty in power."

The powerless as opposed to the all-powerful.

In a third step in the creation of an idol

people bring sacrifices and look to the idol for advice and direction.

But Jeremiah says in v.8

that those who do such things are all senseless and foolish--

they are taught by "**worthless wooden idols.**"

v.14-- "**Everyone is senseless and without knowledge;**

every goldsmith is shamed by his idols.

The images he makes are a *fraud*,"

All idols are deceitful—

they are fake;

they promise what they cannot deliver;

they necessarily draw people away from what is real./

But, in contrast, Jeremiah says in v. 10,

the Lord, he is truth--he is the true God.

For regardless of what the post-modernists may say,

truth is not a human creation,

a mere cultural construct.

Truth is not what we make it--

it is not what is true "for me."

Truth is what is—for everyone.

Truth is the recognition of reality--

the reality that resides ultimately

in the being of the one true God.

And in fact, only God knows the truth,
the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

And idols by their very nature obscure reality,
because they obscure the foundation of all reality--
the reality of God himself.

Idols are created; God is the creator.

Idols are powerless; God is all-powerful.

A third contrast, then--

Idols are **deceitful**--God is **true**.

In a final stage in the creation of idols,
idol-makers expect the idol they make
to repay their reverence, their obedience, and their sacrifices
with security, prosperity, health, and happiness.
The idol becomes their savior and their source of life.

But Jeremiah argues that what is real will always have the last word--

I can believe with all my heart
that I can jump off the Key Bridge and not get hurt,
but if I try it, without a hang glider or a parachute--
I am in for a rude awakening.
The harsh reality of gravity will overrule my own sincerely held beliefs.

And so I may believe that when I die,

I simply cease to exist and vanish into nothingness,
but if God really does exist, and what he says is true,
I will most certainly be subject to his judgment.

Idols deceive us about the nature of reality,
but God is the truth,
and as the truth,
he alone establishes the standards of moral accountability--
he alone is judge.

And **God will judge--**

v.10-- “When he is angry, the earth trembles;
the nations cannot endure his wrath.”

In contrast,

the idols **will be judged--**
and “when their judgment comes,” v. 15, “they will perish.”

Idols are created; God is the Creator.

Idols are powerless; God is all-powerful.

Idols are deceitful; God is true.

Idols will be judged; God is the judge.

All of this leads to a final **conclusion--**

idols are **worthless--**

three times Jeremiah uses that word--

they are empty;

without substance;

they are full of vanity--

they are the worthless creations of human minds.

The Lord God alone is worthy of our worship.

v. 6--“No one is like you, LORD;

you are great, and your name is mighty in power.

Who should not fear you,

King of the nations?”

The Lord God--

He is the one you should fear--

before him you should bow in reverent awe.

We are to fear God--

not the celestial signs in the sky which terrify the nations,

Jeremiah says in v.2.

Don't be disturbed by the eclipses and comets,

for the Lord made the heavens.

Do not fear the idols of your own making, he says in v. 5--

“they can do no harm, nor can they do any good.”

It is the Lord you should fear.

It is the Lord you should worship--

v. 7--“Who should not fear you,

King of the nations?

This is your due.”

This is your due--

The worship of God is fitting;

it is appropriate to who he is--

it makes sense;

it is reasonable;

it is the way of **wisdom**.

Any other way is just foolishness--

In fact, in Jeremiah's mind,

this comparison of idols to the Lord

is like comparing a scarecrow to a king.

v.5--"Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field,

their idols cannot speak;

they must be carried because they cannot walk."

Now, a scarecrow has a useful function--

it can increase the harvest and foster human prospering.

And, for the poor birds who don't know any better,

a scarecrow can even evoke fear.

But a scarecrow is ultimately a deceit--

it's a creature of our own creation--

it has no life of its own,

it is merely an image of something else--

a scarecrow has no power to change the world./

In comparison, look at v.10--

"But the Lord is the true God;

he is the living God, the eternal King.”

The scarecrow may scare away a few birds,

but the Lord rules--

he rules in heaven and on earth./

A scarecrow and a king--

It is a ludicrous comparison--

and it's meant to be--

for idolatry is foolish. /

Then why should anyone ever bow before a lifeless idol?

Idols deserve mockery and not worship--

why should they be treated so seriously?

One reason is suggested in v. 2--

“Do not learn the ways of the nations” he says.

Idolatry is one of **"the ways of the nations"**--

It is, in v. 3, among **“the practices, the customs, of the peoples.”**

In other words,

some idols are so pervasive,

they are so much a part of our culture,

that it seems very reasonable to revere them.

It's just what everybody does.

I think men wearing neckties falls into the same category--

it is one of "the customs of the people."

If you think about, it doesn't make any sense--I haven't yet figured it out,
but if you go to a wedding or a funeral
almost every man will wear one--it's just expected.
And if you don't wear a tie, you risk offending people.

So it is with idolatry--

Fallen human society provides a context in which certain forms of idolatry
have a social sanction, a cultural legitimacy—
they are demanded.

In fact, like refusing to wear neckties,
resisting certain forms of idolatry
can be considered socially deviant and destructive;
a threat to the social fabric.

The apostle Paul caused a riot among the Ephesians
when he spoke against worshipping their patron goddess Artemis (Acts 19),
and it almost cost him his life.

The early Christians were ridiculed as atheists
when they refused to acknowledge the gods of Rome.

And they were martyred when they refused to bow before the image of Caesar.

When Rome fell to the barbarians,
the Christians were blamed.

The gods were offended, the people said,
because the Christians refused to follow the pagan practices of the nation.

Whole nations can be built around certain idolatrous practices--

and to call such practices worthless and empty

can be very costly indeed.

Just try speaking against the prophet Mohammed in Saudi Arabia

and see what happens.

And Jeremiah knew that only a conviction of the transcendent greatness of God

could enable the Jews of his day

to resist the enormous pressures of society toward idolatry.

And so it is today.

So what are **“the ways of the nations,”**

“the practices of the peoples,” regarding idolatry

that may seem alluring to us?

The first and most obvious idol that comes to my mind is **money**.

And there’s nothing particularly modern about this one--

Jesus talked of money in terms of idolatry

when he said, **“You cannot serve both God and Mammon,”**

speaking of money as a personified false god.

Just consider how money fits our description of idolatry--

It is a part of creation--

which is then taken out of its context as a man-made tool of exchange

and put in a special place in our lives,

having a kind of independent power of its own.

We discover its usefulness, and gradually come to revere it--
making all kinds of sacrifices to it
in the hopes of obtaining the security and prosperity and happiness
that we believe it can give us.

We sacrifice our families, our health, even our integrity to this god.

We live in fear of its power to harm us if we don't do what it requires.

We even seek its advice and guidance when important decisions are made,
when we buy the biggest or the best we can afford,
that is, what our idol money will allow us to purchase,
rather than simply what we need.

Make no mistake about it, it is money that dictates our decisions.

What a powerful and pervasive idol money is in our culture.

It is glamorous--

not unlike those gold and silver, purple and blue statues of Jeremiah's day.

It is very difficult to escape its grasp upon us.

It almost seems foolish even to try.

But this god is only the creation of our own hands,

and it will one day perish--for every one of us.

Whether the stock market crashes and we all go broke,

or we come to the end of our lives,

and face the prospect of death--

one day the god of money will forsake us all.

How much money will Bill Gates leave behind when he dies?

All of it, I believe.

Money is powerless to provide what is most important--

life and peace and love.

It is deceitful in what it promises.

It will certainly not provide the standard by which we will all be held accountable
on that day of judgment.

God won't look at our bank accounts, you can be sure of that.

Money is unworthy of our worship--

it's ultimately worthless and empty.

Don't let it capture you, Jesus says--

give it away.

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

Money--

that's probably the first idol of our day that comes to our minds.

But there are lots more--

there is the idol of **technology**.

Technology, which is the art of making tools, is good in itself--

it is part of God's good creation.

But the success of technology in our own day

has led to its near deification.

Technology has developed a life of its own
so that rather than being a tool we use,
we begin to feel we are the tools that are being used by our technology,
as we have to adjust our way of life
to accommodate its demands upon us.

If something can be done, it must be done,
and we are told that every new invention will make our lives better and richer.

Technology offers the hope of health, wealth, security, and unlimited prosperity.
So we are willing to sacrifice more and more
to insure its unfettered development.

Technology seems to take on a life of its own--
and in fact, it has the power to evoke fear within us--
as we seem unable to control its power over us.

Doesn't the thought of losing your phone send shivers down your spine!

The military technology we use to keep us secure
also threatens to hold us hostage,
as we think of the prospect of terrorists obtaining nuclear weapons.

Medical technology which keeps us alive
also threatens to keep us alive longer than we want,
and living wills and even physician-assisted suicide
are becoming more common
as a way of protecting ourselves from its power.

Biological technology which enables us to probe

the very blueprint of our genetic makeup
threatens to blur what it means to be human.

We wonder what we have created.

The scarecrow has now become a Frankenstein.

Did you hear about the scientist who figured out

how to link all the computers in the world together?

The engineers decided to give this one vast supercomputer

the biggest problem they could think of:

Is there a God?

The computer spit out the answer, “Now there is.”

Technology--it's an idol of our age.

And we must beware of becoming slaves to the work of our own hands.

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.”

There are others that come to mind.

What about the idol of **entertainment**?

Again, this is a perversion of the good--

surely there is a place for enjoying oneself in this good world that God created--

life is more than work.

But entertainment is increasingly becoming a cultural obsession.

Amusement parks, those man-made monuments of merriment,
and sports stadiums, which grow ever bigger and more elaborate—
they become places of worship,
our modern day temples—
with their Sunday afternoon rituals of adoration,
The Super Bowl has become the year's most sacred religious festival—
far more culturally significant than Easter.
And Disney World is now our national Mecca
almost requiring a personal pilgrimage, a hadj,
at least once in one's lifetime.

Television, that quintessential medium of entertainment, now shapes our lives.

I heard one commentator say that sitcoms and commercials
have a greater corrosive effect on our culture than pornography.
Hollywood did more to change the way Americans think of marriage
than any moral argument.

TV can turn anything into entertainment--
from political campaigns to murder trials.
And through television, as one social observer has put it,
we are "amusing ourselves to death."

Figures of entertainment--
whether the stars of the playing fields or the big screen--
are, as a whole, the most well known
and highest paid members of society.

I realize that I do not pray enough,
and I do not read my Bible enough,
and I do not love my neighbor enough--
but I know I cannot say it is because I do not have enough time--
for I always seem to find time to entertain myself.

Why is that?

What do we expect our entertainment to do for us?

Will it bring us happiness?

Will it provide meaning?

Will it give us a reason for living?

Sadly, many are deceived into thinking so--

but we as the people of God should know better.

“Dear children,” John says, “**keep yourselves from idols.**”

There are still more subtle ways that idolatry can creep into our lives.

The customs of the peoples around us

lead us to worship things like **progress**--

believing that whatever is newer is better;

or we worship **growth**--

believing that whatever is bigger is better;

or we worship **technique**--

believing that I can do anything if you just show me how,

or we worship **reason**--

trust the experts we hear—they can make things right;

or we worship the **scientific**--

“I believe in science,” people proclaim,

so that what is measurable, or quantifiable, or able to be stated statistically
is more real or authoritative.

or we worship **power**--

especially political power--

our problems will be solved if we can just get out the vote;

and our political identity, our political tribe,

is far more influential in how we think

than anything the Bible says.

or we worship **celebrity**--

idolizing the famous regardless of the source of their fame;

or we worship **man-made theology**--

which is based, not on God's revelation of himself in his Word,

but on how we would like to think about God;

or we worship **pleasure and happiness** itself--

pursuing whatever we think will make us feel good.

Life's highest good is simply the authentic expression of my inner desires.

All of these have become the idols of our time--

they are the **sacred cows** of our culture.

and they can become idols for us--

for all of them can assume a god-like place in our lives--

just as the Jews in Jeremiah's time trusted in the idols of wood and stone.

For the sinful human heart is, in the words of John Calvin, "an idol-making factory"³--

always looking for some way to escape from coming face-to-face with the living God.

That's why idolatry is the central challenge to faith--

for idolatry is a challenge to the utter dependability

and complete trustworthiness of God alone.

In idolatry we put something in his place--

we trust in something other than him.

Idolatry replaces the Creator with something within this created order.

Idolatry refuses to let God be God. //

That's the challenge that Jeremiah sets before us today--

The challenge to let God be God.

We can't have it both ways--

we can't claim to be worshippers of God

while keeping a rabbit's foot in our pocket for good luck.

You can't worship God and Mammon, Jesus said,

³Cf. Dick Keyes, in Os Guinness, ed., *No God But God*.

you will be devoted to one and despise the other.

Let nothing in all creation usurp the place of God, he says to us.

We must see the sacred cows of our culture for what they really are--

they are like scarecrows in a cucumber field--

God alone is the eternal King!

For God alone is *outside* creation;

God alone is *over* creation;

God alone is *the Lord* of creation.

God alone transcends all that is within our grasp to control or manipulate.

And once we turn from this transcendent King,

we will inevitably turn to the idols of this world.

And they will dazzle us with their glamour

until, . . .

until we get a glimpse of the glory of God.\

for only when we have seen him--

will we see how absurdly inadequate and deceitful

all our petty idols really are.

That's why we need to come together to worship week after week—

so that we might keep ourselves from idols.

The glory of God--

That's what Jeremiah is pointing his countrymen to--

that's what he's pointing us to--

The Lord who is the true God,

the living God, the eternal King.

He has created us to find our greatest enjoyment,

our highest delight, in him and him alone.

This is what is so tragic, so senseless, about our idolatry.

As the Lord says through Jeremiah earlier in his prophecy—

Jer. 2:12 **Be appalled at this, O heavens,**

and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD.

Jer. 2:13 **"My people have committed two sins:**

They have forsaken me,

the spring of living water,

and have dug their own cisterns,

broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

The Lord God he is the spring of living water

that quenches our deepest thirst.

He is awesome and glorious--

but we need not be afraid of him or run away from him,

In Jesus Christ God has revealed his glory in a way that invites us to come to him.

for in Jesus Christ, God now comes to us, in the humility of a baby in a manger,

and in the weakness of a man on a cross--

"I love you," he says;

"I forgive you," he says,

"I have taken your sin away--

You can trust me with your life."

He is the spring of living water—

our idols are but dirty, leaking buckets in comparison.

I urge you,

let Jesus Christ be the object of your deepest desire

and you will find what alone can satisfy your heart.//

"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols"--

Prayer

What are the idols in your life?

What do you trust in?

What do you look to provide peace or prosperity or purpose in your life?

What is the central focus of your affections?

What guides your decisions?

What do you feel you cannot live without?

Lord, search our hearts we pray--

help us to see through the deceitfulness of our idols

Jesus Christ alone is the way, the truth and the life.

May we be like the Thessalonians,

whom Paul said, **turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God**

and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—

Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.”

In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray.

Judgment and Promise:

God Speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, #4

Feb. 7, 2021

“Worshiping What Is Worthless”

Jeremiah 10:1-16

“Dear children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). These words are as important in our day as they were in John’s, or in Jeremiah’s. This morning we look at the prophet’s critique of idolatry, which comes in the form of a comparison of idols to the Lord God.

I. Idols are created; God is the Creator.

II. Idols are powerless; God is all-powerful.

III. Idols are deceitful; God is true.

IV. Idols will be judged; God is Judge.

V. Idols are worthless; God alone is worthy of worship.

The Idols of our Day—

Money,

Technology

Entertainment, and so on . . .

Idols are" like a scarecrow in a cucumber field;" (v. 5)

"But the Lord is the true God;

he is the living God, the eternal King." (v. 10)

There is no God but God!

Sermon Response:

“Worshiping What Is Worthless”

Jeremiah 10:1-16

- How do you define “idolatry”? Why is it such a temptation to us? What attracts us to them? How are they deceitful and dangerous? Why do we cling to them and revere them?
- What are some of the idols of our culture that vie for your allegiance? What are idols that you find yourself most drawn to?
- What is the antidote to idolatry? What can keep us from that false worship? What do you find helpful in this battle?
- Pray that we may “keep ourselves from idols.”