

IDOLS OF THE KING

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FIRST THINGS are always most obvious, but their obviousness is no guarantee that they will always be understood and kept in mind. What could be more obvious than the First Commandment? It is the beginning of our journey towards God. It is like the beginning of a road down which we must travel in order to reach our destination. But like every other beginning it is easily forgotten and even taken for granted after a short while.

Even the most superficial reading of the Old Testament reveals to us, for instance, the proneness of the Jews to idolatry. It stands out from the holy pages like a cancerous growth on a sound body. In spite of their intimate association with God, His innumerable gifts to them and His fatherly promises, the Jews turned from Him to idols whenever they met with the slightest reverses.

Modern mentality has a very difficult task in understanding how the Jews could fall into idolatry. We can't appreciate their point of view because we can't imagine ourselves falling into such a ridiculous practice. In our enlightened and scientific generation such folly simply could not find house room. Who could picture a modern scientist or even an ordinary layman trusting in the power of a god made from wood or stone? Such a foolish notion would be scornfully rejected. Disclaiming the existence of it, the modern would assure you that such worship is about as remotely possible as a navy without ships.

But is it so far-fetched? The peers of science, with a look of benign indulgence, frankly and confidently assure us that no idol of wood or stone could possibly have any divine power, but they and we, as well, are by no means so acutely aware that only God has divine power, that only He is God. We may tell ourselves that we do not substitute artistic rocks and carved splinters for God but there is no doubt that we do substitute other things which are just as inane. Re-counting just a few of them will bring home to us how closely the truth of the First Commandment is woven into the fabric of our lives, how the denial of it brings trouble, and how the practice of idolatry is much more prevalent than appears at first glance. Its permeation into every field of our lives should be a cause for alarm.

Though prominent in the practice of idolatry the Jews were not

the first to worship an idol. You might easily guess that the devil was addicted to that practice long before. And so he was. Of course, being a pure spirit, there was no question of bending his spiritual knee to a chunk of glorified stone. Even if he could do such a thing, his natural wisdom would have restrained him from paying homage to any object so crassly inelegant as a pile of rock. Nor did he attempt such an impossible task as to try to be God. Again his wisdom would not permit such an outlandish notion to enter his mind. What he did attempt was to attain the reward God had promised to him—beatitude—through his own power, which, though it was very great, was infinitely distant from the power of God without which that beatitude cannot be attained. At bottom, the devil's fruitless effort was the prototype and foundation for our homely adage that familiarity breeds contempt. In his endeavor to be independent of the help of God he committed the first sin of pride which is nothing else than a refusal to recognize our dependence upon God. Trusting in the power of his own will, the devil was the first to erect an idol. What happened to him and the depths of hell into which he was cast testify to the terrible punishment the Creator of our being has in store for those who violate His Godhead. From being the most exalted of all creatures, Lucifer was thrust into the realm of darkness where he will be forever tormented not only by the loss of grace, which is most important, but also by perceiving the excellence of his nature, which he retains in all its fulness, reduced to such a pitiful state. But though he was the first he was not the last to attempt to displace God. That pernicious effort still goes on and will go on until men have fully realized what God meant when He gave His command—Thou shalt not have strange gods before Me.

Even the field of government has not escaped the permeation of idolatry. Russia, Germany and Italy, to name just a few of the arch-totalitarian groups, have so completely idolized the state that there is no room left on the face of the earth for other nations let alone for God. State-idolism is without doubt a new reality. True, emperors and kings have tried to subdue the world under one rule, but that was more for the purpose of inflating their egos than for establishing the state as supreme. Though our present dictators have their personal aggrandisement in mind, they camouflage it well under their philosophy of the supreme character of the state. Their personal attraction is a very great drawing power but their philosophy is the telling factor in winning the almost unanimous support of the common people. Here again an idol is set up and once again such expensive folly has to be paid for in full. Our present condition of world conflict is part

of the price. Another part is the effect on truth of the twisted philosophy which fosters a world-shattering effort, such as we are witnessing, to make a god out of the state. The innate longing of man for God has to be satisfied in some way. When religion which leads to the true God is suppressed and supplanted by an ideology which makes the state the goal of man's existence, then the state takes the place of God and idolatry is the only name worthy to describe the devilish substitution. With all its horrible attendant circumstances, this worship of idols is just as real as it was in the Old Testament. The idol may not be as tangible as the golden calf but it is just as offensive to God.

Idolatry could have no growth in society unless it first found root in the individual. Because an individual's personal relation to God is most hidden, we find the most fertile field for idol-worship in the heart of the individual. He can "get away with it" in the hidden recesses of his own heart, though of course he is the only one who has faith in his sly ability. The idols which a man sets up for himself are as many as they are varied. Perhaps the most obvious modern idol is money. But it is not really modern because the gold out of which the calf in the Book of Exodus was fashioned was really a symbol of the money which moderns use for their idol. In a world where business is conducted according to any method that works, money holds supreme sway and lures foolishly-trusting men away from the worship of the true God to the worship of the almighty dollar. We may think we rule the universe because we have a commanding excess of money but it would not take long for a dispassionate examination to convince us that money really rules us and that the homage we pay to it is due to God alone. However, such an examination is practically impossible for the avaricious man because his good judgment is as hopelessly clouded as a sailor's vision in a heavy fog.

There are other goods of the body and goods of the soul which man sets his heart upon. To name a few, there are power, fame, intellectual attainment and sometimes even virtue. Power is by its nature limited to a few. Many could not exercise it, otherwise there would be none over whom it could be wielded. But the lust in those few makes an insatiable idol and usually ends in their violent destruction. Fame is a slippery thing for it depends on the fickleness of the mob. Those who make fame their idol must be very shortsighted, because they neither think to look at what is on the other side of the wheel of fortune, nor do they consider that the weight of their fame might cause the wheel to turn. In the line of intellectual attainment,

those who trust in their knowledge as if it were infinite have indeed a great gap in their science of life. When and if they realize that all their knowledge is as so much straw, their misery will only be equalled by their chagrin at having entirely overlooked the one fact they should have known. That virtue can also be an idol might seem strange though it should not. In the pursuit of virtue it often happens that we cannot recognize the forest on account of the trees. We seek virtue as a valuable possession and when we perceive that on account of it we command respect, we seek a little more virtue in order to command a little more respect. Very soon, in fact with a rapidity that should be suspicious, we reach the point where virtue seems easy, and we think ourselves saints. In reality we are not even on the road to sanctity which brings us to the possession of God. We have accepted a substitute for God. We have made an idol out of virtue and though we find it comely and possessed of enticing charms, it is nevertheless a creature and cannot replace the Creator.

By far the most common form of idolatry is that which more or less infects all who are not saints. It is the worship of our own will. It is so easy to fall into, that we can progress very far in the establishment of a surprisingly firm habit of having our own way before we realize that the habitual opposition we set up in our own minds is really an idol calling for the most profound adoration. Our opposition may not take us as far as serious sin but it impedes our advance to perfection like a dragging anchor slows down a boat. We were put upon this earth to do the will of God and reach perfection. If we are to follow the path which the Son of God mapped out and followed for the benefit of us all, we cannot insist upon always having our own way. We have only to look at the example of Christ Who came to do the will of His Father, to realize that we are not following His example and as a result cannot lay just claim to His reward. The religious life is based upon this very same foundation, namely, doing the will of others in preference to our own. But what the religious does with the vow of obedience the layman must do without it, for no one is excused from doing the will of God if he entertains any hopes for heaven.

Pagan culture is an infallible sign of idolatry. If there is any doubt that idolatry is something to be reckoned with in our generation we have only to examine our culture in order to clear up any confusion about the matter. Examine the inspiration of modern effort in every field. The American penchant for making the biggest and the best is positively pagan. Remember that the innate desire of every man's heart for God has to be satisfied. If he doesn't find God, he

will put something in His place. Man's effort, honored by the world, to make superlatives in quantity and quality is really a reaching for the infinite and a substitution for the Infinite. When modern thought awakens to the fact that God alone is infinite, when our age realizes that God alone is worthy of worship, when we refuse to make or accept any substitute for God, then our obedience will, on the word of God, bring us what we are seeking, what according to our nature we cannot help but seek, God Himself.