

# 1 John 5:21 Commentary

PREVIOUS

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FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD AND HIS CHILDREN  
Click chart to enlarge  
Charts from [Jensen's Survey of the NT](#) - used by permission  
Another Overview Chart - [1 John](#) - Charles Swindoll

BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP		BEHAVIOR OF FELLOWSHIP	
Conditions of Fellowship	Cautions of Fellowship	Fellowship Characteristics	Fellowship Consequences
Meaning of Fellowship 1 Jn 1:1-2:27		Manifestations of Fellowship 1 Jn 2:28-5:21	
Abiding in God's Light		Abiding in God's Love	
Written in Ephesus			
circa 90 AD			

From Talk Thru the Bible

1 John 5:21 Little children, **guard** yourselves from idols:

**Greek** - Teknia **phulaxate** (2PAAM) heauta eidolon:

**Amplified** - Little children, keep yourselves from idols (false gods)—[from anything and everything that would occupy the place in your heart due to God, from any sort of substitute for Him that would take first place in your life]. Amen (so let it be).

- **Little:** 1Jn 2:1
- **Guard:** Ex 20:3,4 1Co 10:7,14 2Co 6:16,17 Rev 9:20 13:14,15 14:11
- [1 John 5 Resources](#) - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

## ONE LAST WARNING: WATCH OUT FOR IDOLS!

**Cole** introduces this verse noting that in 1Jn 5:20 "John has just mentioned the true God. This undoubtedly brought to his mind the false god of the heretics. They denied the God of the Bible. They said that "the Christ" came upon the man Jesus at His baptism and left just prior to His crucifixion. But they did not believe that He is eternal God in human flesh. In light of their false god, it is natural for John to warn his little children to guard themselves from idols." ([1 John 5:18-21 Knowing This, Guard Yourself](#))

**Little children** ([5043](#))(**teknon**) is a tender word (last used 1Jn 4:4-note) conveying the sense of "little born-ones." **Teknon** "is an affectionate pastoral reminder of his personal concern for his readers in view of the dangers confronting them." (Hiebert) "Little children" also could imply that we are vulnerable and weak!

**Little children** - all NT uses are by John - John 13:33; 1Jn 2:1-note, 1Jn 2:12-note, 1Jn 2:28-note; 1Jn 3:7-note, 1Jn 3:18-note; 1Jn 4:4-note; 1Jn 5:21

**Guard** ([5442](#))(**phulasso**) means to watch, keeping on guard like an armed military sentinel guarding a restricted base ready to repulse any enemy incursion. Elsewhere **phulasso** is used of guarding truth (eg, 1Ti 5:21, 6:20, 2Ti 1:14-note) It describes the shepherds "keeping watch (phulasso) over their flock by night (Lk 2:8), which congers up the image of savage wolves seeking to devour the helpless sheep. John's only other uses of **phulasso** are in his Gospel - Jn 12:25, John 17:12.

**Vine** - **phulasso**, stronger than **tereo**, "to keep." The **aorist**, or point tense, here signifies the decisiveness of the command; there is to be no hesitation, no wavering; the command is to be constantly carried out, and at every point wholeheartedly fulfilled.

In 1John 5:18-note the saints have been assured of God's keeping activity of their behalf, but now he stresses their responsibility in guarding their spiritual security. This combination of God's provision and man's responsibility reminds one of Paul's words to the saints at Philippi...

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out** (**present imperative** - command to make this your habitual practice - only possible as we rely on and surrender to the truth in the Phil 2:13!) your salvation with fear and trembling; **for** (**term of explanation**) it is God Who is at work in you (Who is this but the Holy Spirit!), both to will and to work for [His] good pleasure. (Phil 2:12-note, Phil 2:13-note) (**Read the NLT paraphrase** of Phil 2:13NLT = the Spirit gives us both the "desire" and the "power." Praise God!)

**Phulasso** is in the **aorist imperative** calling for a sense of urgency. Do this now. Don't delay. Beloved the only way you or I can obey this command is by casting off self-reliance and self-effort and yielding to the filling of the Spirit, Who alone can enable us to successfully guard ourselves from idols (cp the role of the Spirit in Ro 8:13-note).

**Wuest** says the verb tense John selects "marks a crisis" quoting **Smith** who explains that "The Cerinthian heresy was a desperate assault demanding a decisive repulse" ([Word Studies from the Greek New Testament](#))

**Hiebert** adds that "The **aorist imperative** carries a sense of urgency, "effectively keep yourselves," and the **active voice** with the reflexive pronoun "**yourselves**" stresses their personal responsibility in assuring their safety." ([The Epistles of John- An Expository Commentary](#))

**Robertson** concurs that "The **active voice** with the reflexive accents the need of effort on their part. Idolatry was everywhere and the peril was great."

**Wuest** notes that **phulasso** "is used of the garrison of a city guarding it against attack from without." ([Ibid](#))

**David Smith** adds that "The **heart** is a citadel, and it must be guarded against insidious assailants from without." (Smith).

**From** is the preposition **apo** which conveys the idea of separation! The idea would seem to be to put some distance between yourself and seductive idols, whatever those "idols" are in your life! Don't try to fool yourself. You know the idols you are likely to "bow down" to! Avoid them assiduously!

**Cole** - John tells us to "**guard**" ourselves from idols, which implies that we have something valuable that the enemy is trying to steal.

Spurgeon points out that if a man has a box and he's not sure what's in it, he won't be very careful about guarding it. But if he knows that it contains a rare and valuable treasure, he will be diligent to guard it carefully. John is saying that if you know the true God and His Son Jesus Christ, you have a treasure. Guard it so that you don't drift into one of the many forms of idolatry. ([1 John 5:18-21 Knowing This, Guard Yourself](#))

**Idols** ([1497](#))(**eidolon** from **eidos** = that which is seen, what is visible, figure, appearance) is primarily a phantom, form, image, shadow or likeness.

**Vine** has an excellent practical note on **idols** - if we would enjoy the practical experience of being in the Father and Son, we must guard ourselves against the perils that arise from a world lying in the evil one. An **idol** is not only a heathen image; the literal significance of the word "**idol**" is "what is seen"; it signifies not only that which would engage the attention of the physical eyesight, to the detriment of the use of our spiritual faculties, but also any false conception which would engross the mind to the obscuring of the vision of faith. We are to guard ourselves against everything that would mar the spiritual life which Christ would live out in us, everything of self which would interrupt the power and effect of that life, every teaching which masquerades as truth, but which on spiritual examination is found to contain that which is contrary to Scripture, and therefore denies in any measure the attributes of God, the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Commentators are divided as to whether Paul meant the pagan **idols** in general or to **idols** in a more figurative sense as describing anything that took the place of God (Westcott favors the latter).

**Hiebert** feels in giving this warning against **idols** "John had in mind the false teachers with their perverse view of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Repeatedly John has warned against corruption of the redemptive message in Christ and the perversion of the true identity of the incarnate Son of God. The reference to the true or real God in 1Jn 5:20 seems to have prompted John to brand their fictional, humanly contrived conceptions of Christ as idols, placing them in the same category as the pagan images and the imagined gods they represented. So understood, Grayston characterizes this closing comment "as a finally wounding blow against the dissidents' attachment to God." Their infatuation with their own views concerning the true God and His incarnate Son was indeed a new kind of idolatry. His verdict is equally valid today!" ([The Epistles of John- An Expository Commentary](#))

**NET Note** on **idols** - The modern reader may wonder what all this has to do with idolatry. In the author's mind, to follow the secessionist opponents with their false Christology would amount to idolatry, since it would involve worshiping a false god instead of the true God, Jesus Christ. Thus guard yourselves from idols means for the readers to guard themselves against the opponents and their teaching. ([NET Note](#))

**Smith** on **idols** - "John is thinking, not of the heathen worship of Ephesus—Artemis and her Temple, but of the heretical substitutes for the Christian conception of God."

**Wuest** - John had just written concerning the genuine God of the Bible. Now he warns against the false, counterfeit gods of paganism. **Vincent** suggests that the command, however, has apparently the wider Pauline sense, to guard against everything which occupies the place of God. ([Word Studies from the Greek New Testament](#)) (I tend to agree with Vincent -- in 21st century America there are idols literally everywhere! And they all would seek to steal our allegiance to God!)

**Cole** has a pithy application of John's warning against **idols** - In the most basic sense, an idol is anything that takes the rightful place of God in your life. Paul equated covetousness or greed with idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Your career, your pursuit of money, your possessions, excessive devotion to leisure and recreation, or even putting a human relationship ahead of your relationship with God, may all become idols. Putting your intellect above God's revelation is idolatry. Watching hours of inane or immoral TV shows each week or spending hours playing computer games, while not having time to spend with God or serve Him, is **idolatry**. At the root of all of these is the idol of **self**. **The idolater has not yielded the throne of his life to the true God**. Rather, he wants his will and his way, and he tries to use God to get what he wants. If his god delivers, he sets the god back on the shelf until the next time he needs something and then uses it again. If it doesn't deliver, he'll shop around for a better god who gets him what he wants. But the idolater does not submit to the living and true God. I fear that even many who claim to be born again Christians are only trying to use God to get happiness or peace or a better life. If He brings trials, they look for a new god. That is idolatry! ([1 John 5:18-21 Knowing This, Guard Yourself](#))

**Amen** - Is added in the KJV (Textus Receptus) but is not in the more modern translations.

**NET Note** on **Amen** - Most later MSS (P M) have amēn ("amen") at the end of this letter. Such a conclusion is routinely added by scribes to NT books because a few of these books originally had such an ending (cf. Ro 16:27; Gal 6:18; Jude 1:25). A majority of Greek witnesses have the concluding amen in every NT book except Acts, James, and 3 John (and even in these books, amen is found in some witnesses). It is thus a predictable variant. Further, the earliest and best witnesses, along with several others (א B Ψ 33 323 630 1505 1739 al sy co), lack the inoffensive particle, rendering its omission as the authentic reading. ([NET Note](#))

**J C Ryle** - When Alexander the Great visited the Greek philosopher, Diogenes, he asked him if there was anything that he could give him. He got this short answer, "I want nothing but that you should stand from between me and the sun." One thing there is which should never satisfy and content us; and that is, "anything that stands between our souls and Christ."

**Illustration of Idols** - A Newsweek article many years ago (1/31/1983) told about how treasure hunters looking to make a huge profit were stealing rare idols from the Hopi reservation. The worst theft happened in 1978, when looters took four ancient stick figures representing the most sacred deities of the Hopi religion. "Without the idols, there could be no Hopi rituals," the article stated, "and without the rituals, the tribe's spiritual life was in danger of extinction." A tribal leader explained that these ceremonies "bring blessings in rainfall, bountiful crops, good health, long life. That is being lost to us." What a sad description of idolatry! You make up your own gods and then use them to get what you want. The problem is, these gods may be stolen and your way of life is destroyed. If it can be taken from you, it isn't the true God! Make sure that even if you claim to follow Him as a born again Christian, you don't fall into the idolatry of using Him to get what you want, or accepting the parts of Him that you like and rejecting the parts you don't like. That is no different than pagan idolatry... Guard yourselves from idols!... **Where are you most tempted to idolatry? How can you guard yourself against it?** ([Steven Cole](#))

#### Related Resources:

- [What is the definition of idolatry?](#)
- [1 John 5:21 The Peril of Idolatry](#)
- [Why is idol worship such a powerful temptation?](#)
- [What is a graven image?](#)
- [What is the true meaning of the second commandment?](#)

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#### [Making Jesus Into An Idol - Our Daily Bread](#)

Why would John end his letter by writing, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols"? (1 Jn. 5:21). Certainly his words do not apply to us, do they? We don't have false gods in our living rooms, do we?

What exactly did John mean by "idols"?

It's unlikely he was talking about the gods of metal and stone so prevalent in his time. Those kinds of idols were not as great a temptation to the people he was writing to as they had been to their ancestors.

An idol, however, can be any false idea about God or substitute for Him that turns us away from knowing His true character. John stated that Jesus Christ is the true God (v.20). To know Jesus is to know the Father. To be intimately related to His Son is to be forever related to the eternal God.

It is possible for me to worship an idol I call "Jesus" that leads me away from Him. Perhaps my Jesus resembles a teddy bear that lulls me to sleep, or an indulgent father, or a Santa Claus who doesn't take my sin seriously. Such misconceptions are not the Jesus of the Bible but an idol. That's the reason John warned us to keep ourselves from idols.

Be careful. Devotion to a false Jesus is idolatry. But knowing Jesus, the true God, brings us eternal life. [Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. — Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#)

So often, Lord, in seeking You,  
My sin distorts and dims my view;  
Help me in prayer to see Your face  
And learn Your righteousness and grace.  
—Gustafson

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#### [Idols In Disguise - Our Daily Bread](#)

When we hear the word idol, we think of a statue of a person or animal that is the focus of worship. For example, we think of the golden calf the Israelites made soon after they left Egypt (Ex. 32:1-6). We know that God abhors such images, yet is it possible that we worship idols without knowing it?

I read about a woman who kept her car in showroom condition. One night her garage caught on fire, and her neighbors had to restrain her from rushing into the flames to rescue her car. As it exploded, she realized that she had nearly sacrificed her life for that car. It had become an idol.

An even more subtle form of idolatry is the reliance on our church activities to maintain a reputation for being spiritual. Or consider the man who keeps adding "one more gadget" to an already over-equipped home. If anything other than God becomes our primary focus in life, it is an idol.

In Colossians 3:5, Paul identified covetousness as a type of idolatry. He exhorted us to say no to these grasping ways that are part of our old self, and to say yes to our new self, created to live like Christ (v.10).

What's the main focus of your life? The answer may surprise you. ([Our Daily Bread. Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. — Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Nothing between, like worldly pleasure,  
Habits of life, though harmless they seem,  
Must not my heart from Him ever sever—  
He is my all! There's nothing between.

—Tindley

**An idol is anything that takes the place of God.**

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### **F. B. Meyer. Our Daily Walk 1 John 5:21**

OCTOBER 11 OUR POSSESSIONS

"Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness; for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of things which he possesseth."--Luke 12:15.

"Little children, guard yourselves from idols."--1 John 5:21 (R.V.).

THE PETITION addressed to Christ, in this paragraph from which our text is selected, has been constantly made to Him in subsequent ages. Men are always demanding that He should divide the inheritance more equally. But our Lord did not come to adjust human relationships by the exercise of His autocratic will. He deals rather with the overreaching and grasping avarice which leads the rich to withhold, and the discontent which compels the poor to murmur. He saw in the demand of the suppliant a tendency to the same covetousness which prompted the other brother to withhold the portion of the inheritance, which was not justly his.

Our Lord announced the far-reaching truth that life does not consist in what we possess, but in what we are. We are rich, not in proportion to the amount standing to our credit in the bank, or to the acreage of our inheritance, but to the purity, strength, and generosity of our nature. When we lay up treasure for ourselves, we become paupers in God's universe. The only way of dealing with covetousness, which makes an idol of money or possessions, is to regard our property only as gifts entrusted to us for the benefit of others. Let us mortify the spirit of greed, which is so strong within us all, by sowing the acreage of our life as indicated in 2Cor. 9:1ff.

Sensual appetite is an idol with many (Phil. 3:19). Eating and drinking, feasting and pleasure-seeking are idols before which many prostrate themselves. And there are other idols than these, for whenever any earthly object engrosses our soul, and intercepts the love and faith that should pass from us to God, it is an idol which must be overthrown. Whenever we can look up from anything that we possess into the face of God, and thank Him as its Giver, we may use and enjoy it without fear. We are not likely to make an idol of that which we receive direct from the hand of our Heavenly Father, whose good pleasure it is to give good gifts to His children (1 Ti 4:4, 5).

PRAYER - O Lord, the Portion of our Inheritance, give us grace, we pray Thee, never to aim at or desire anything out of Thee. What we can enjoy in Thee, give us according to Thy Will; what we cannot, deny us. AMEN.

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### **J C Philpot - The History of an Idol, its Rise, Reign and Progress - J. C. Philpot, October, 1855**

"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." 1 John 5:21

Idolatry is a sin very deeply rooted in the human heart. We need not go very far to find of this the most convincing proofs. Besides the experience of every age and every climate, we find it where we would least expect it—the prevailing sin of a people who had the greatest possible proofs of its wickedness and folly, and the strongest evidences of the being, greatness, and power of God.

It amazes us sometimes in reading the history of God's ancient people, as recorded in the inspired page, that, after such wondrous and repeated displays of his presence, glory, and majesty, they should again and again bow down before stocks and stones. That

those who had witnessed all the plagues of Egypt had passed through the Red Sea by an explicit miracle, were daily living on manna that fell from heaven and water that gushed out of the rock, who had but to look upward by day to behold the pillar of the cloud, and by night the pillar of fire to manifest the presence of Jehovah in their midst—that this people, because Moses delayed coming down from the Mount, should fall down before a golden calf, and say, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt," does indeed strike our minds with astonishment.

And that this sin should break forth in them again and again through their whole history down to the period of the Babylonish captivity, in spite of all the warnings of their prophets, all the terrible judgments of God, all their repeated captivities, and, what would be far more likely to cure it, all their repeated deliverances, does indeed show, if other proof were lacking, that it is a disease deeply rooted in the very constitution of fallen man.

If this be the case, unless human nature has undergone a change, of which neither scripture nor experience affords any evidence, the disease must be in the heart of man now as much as ever; and if it exists it must manifest itself, for a constitutional malady can no more be in the soul and not show itself, than there can be a sickness in the body without evident symptoms of illness.

It is true that the disease does not break out exactly in the same form. It is true that golden calves are not now worshiped, at least the calf is not, if the gold be, nor do Protestants adore images of wood, brass, or stone. But that rank; property, fashion, honor, the opinion of the world, with everything which feeds the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, are as much idolized now as Baal and Moloch were once in Judea, and Juggernaut now is in the plains of Hindostan, is true beyond all contradiction.

But what is idolatry? To answer this question, let us ask another. What is an idol? Is not this the essence of the idea conveyed by the word, that an idol occupies that place in our esteem and affections, in our thoughts, words and ways, in our dependence and reliance, in our worship and devotedness, which is due to God only? Whatever is to us what the Lord alone should be, that is to us an idol. It is true that these idols differ almost as widely as the peculiar propensities of different individuals. But as both in ancient and modern times the grosser idols of wood and stone were and are beyond all calculation in number, variety, shape, and size, so is it in these inner idols of which the outer are mere symbols and representations.

Nothing has been too base or too brutal, too great or too little, too noble or too vile, from the sun walking in its brightness to a snake, a monkey, an onion, a bit of rag, which man has not worshiped. And these intended representations of Divinity were but the outward symbols of what man inwardly worshiped—for the inward idol preceded the outward, and the fingers merely carved what the imagination had previously devised. The gross material idol, then, whether an Apollo, "the statue which enchants the world," or a negro fetish, is but a symbol of the inner mind of man.

In that inner mind there are certain feelings and affections, as well as traditional recollections, which sin has perverted and debased, but not extinguished. Such are, a sense of a divine Creator, a dread of his anger and justice, a dim belief in a state after death of happiness or misery, an accountability to him for our actions, and a duty of religious worship. From this natural religion in the mind of man, a relic of the fall, sprang the first idea of idolatry—for the original knowledge of God being lost, the mind of man sought a substitute, and that substitute is an idol—the word, like the similar term "image," signifying a shape or figure, a representation or likeness of God.

Against this therefore, the second commandment in the Decalogue is directed. Now, this idea of representing God by some visible image being once established by the combined force of depraved intellect and conscience, the debased mind of man soon sought out channels for its lusts and passions to run in, which religion might consecrate; and thus the devilish idea was conceived and carried out, to make a god of SIN. Thus bloodshed, lust, theft, with every other crime, were virtually turned into gods named Mars, Venus, Mercury, and so on; and then came the horrible conclusion, that the more sin there was committed, the more these gods were honored. Need we wonder at the horrible debasement of the heathen world, and the utter prostration of moral principles produced by the worship of idols—or at the just abhorrence and wrath of God against idolatry?

But we need not dwell on this part of the subject. There is another form of idolatry much nearer home; the idolatry not of an ancient Pagan or a modern Hindoo, but that of a Christian.

Idolatry is the very breath of the carnal mind. All that "the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts," desires, thirsts after, is gratified by, or occupied with, is its idol—and so far as a Christian is under the influence of this carnal mind, this old man, this evil heart of unbelief, this fallen Adam-nature, this body of sin and death—all which are Scripture terms to express one and the same thing—he bows down to the idol set up in the chambers of imagery.

There is an old Latin proverb, that "love and a cough are two things impossible to be concealed;" and thus, though an idol may be hidden in the heart as carefully as Laban's teraphim in the camel's saddle, or the ephod and molten image in the House of Micah, (Judges 18:14), yet it will be discovered by the love shown to it, as surely as the suppressed cough of the consumptive patient cannot escape the ear of the physician.

Nor need we go far, if we would but be honest with ourselves, to find out each our own idol—what it is, and how deep it lies, what worship it obtains, what honor it receives, and what affection it engrosses. Let me ask myself, "What do I most love?" If I hardly know how to answer that question, let me put to myself another, "What do I most think upon? In what channel do I usually find my thoughts flow when unrestrained?" for thoughts flow to the idol as water to the lowest spot in a field.

If, then, the thoughts flow continually to the farm, the shop, the business, the investment, to the husband, wife, or child; to that which feeds lust or pride, worldliness or covetousness, self-conceit or self-admiration—that is the idol which, as a magnet, attracts the thoughts of the mind towards it.

Your idol may not be mine, nor mine yours; and yet we may both be idolaters. You may despise or even hate my idol, and wonder how I can be such a fool or such a sinner as to hug it to my bosom; and I may wonder how a partaker of grace can be so inconsistent as to love such a silly idol as yours. You may condemn me, and I condemn you; and the word of God's grace and the verdict of a living conscience condemn us both.

O how various and how innumerable those idols are! One man may possess a refined taste and educated mind. Books, learning, literature, languages, general information, shall be his idol. Music, vocal and instrumental, may be the idol of a second; so sweet to his ears, such inward feelings of delight are kindled by the melodious strains of voice or instrument, that music is in all his thoughts, and hours are spent in producing those harmonious sounds which perish in their utterance. Painting, statuary, architecture, the fine arts generally, may be the Baal, the dominating passion of a third. Poetry, with its glowing thoughts, burning words, passionate utterances, vivid pictures, melodious cadence, and sustained flow of all that is beautiful in language and expression, may be the delight of a fourth. Science, mathematical or mechanical, the eager pursuit of a fifth. These are the highest flights of the human mind; these are not the base idols of the drunken feast, the low jest, the mirthful supper, or even that less debasing but enervating idol—sleep and indolence, as if life's highest enjoyments were those of the swine in the sty.

An idol is not to be admired for its beauty or loathed for its ugliness, but to be hated because it is an idol. You middle-class people, who despise art and science, language and learning, as you despise the ale-house, and ballfield, may still have an idol. Your garden, your beautiful roses, your verbenas, fuchsias, needing all the care and attention of a babe in arms, may be your idol. Or your pretty children, so admired as they walk in the street; or your new house and all the new furniture; or your son who is getting on so well in business; or your daughter so comfortably settled in life; or your dear husband so generally respected, and just now doing so nicely in the farm. Or your own still dearer SELF that needs so much feeding, and dressing and attending to—who shall count the thousands of idols which draw to themselves those thoughts, and engross those affections which are due to the Lord alone?

You may not be found out. Your idol may be so hidden, or so peculiar, that all our attempts to touch it, have left you and it unscathed. Will you therefore conclude that you have none? Search deeper, look closer; it is not too deep for the eye of God, nor too hidden for the eyes of a tender conscience anointed with divine eye-salve. Hidden love is the deepest of all love; hidden diseases the most incurable of all diseases. Search every fold of your heart until you find it. It may not be so big nor so ugly as your neighbor's; but an idol is still an idol, and an image still an image, whether so small as to be carried in the coat pocket, or as large as a gigantic statue.

Every man has his idol; but it is not every man who sees it. Few groan under it.

"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." 1 John 5:21

"The dearest idol I have known,  
Whatever that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from my heart,  
And worship only Thee."

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**J. C. Philpot. Contemplations & Reflections. Pearls - A snake, a monkey, an onion, a bit of rag**

"Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." 1 John 5:21

Idolatry is a sin very deeply rooted in the human heart.

We need not go very far to find the most convincing proofs of this. Besides the experience of every age and every climate, we find it where we would least expect it—the prevailing sin of a people who had the greatest possible proofs of its wickedness and folly; and the strongest evidences of the being, greatness, and power of God.

It is true that now this sin does not break out exactly in the same form. It is true that golden calves are not now worshiped—at least the calf is not, if the gold is. Nor do Protestants adore images of wood, brass, or stone.

But that rank, property, fashion, honor, the opinion of the world, with everything which feeds the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; are as much idolized now, as Baal and Moloch were once in Judea.

What is an idol?

It is that which occupies that place in our esteem and affections, in our thoughts, words and ways, which is due to God only. Whatever is to us, what the Lord alone should be—that is an idol to us.

It is true that these idols differ almost as widely as the peculiar propensities of different individuals. But as both in ancient and modern times, the grosser idols of wood and stone were and are beyond all calculation in number, variety, shape, and size. So is it in these inner idols, of which the outer idols are mere symbols and representations.

Nothing has been ...  
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too noble or too vile,

from the sun walking in its brightness—to a snake, a monkey, an onion, a bit of rag—which man has not worshiped. And these intended representations of Divinity were but the outward symbols of what man inwardly worshiped. For the inward idol preceded the outward—and the fingers merely carved what the imagination had previously devised. The gross material idol, then, is but a symbol of the inner mind of man.

But we need not dwell on this part of the subject. There is another form of idolatry much nearer home; the idolatry not of an ancient Pagan, or a modern Hindu—but that of a Christian.

Nor need we go far, if we would but be honest with ourselves, to each find out our own idol ...  
what it is, how deep it lies, what worship it obtains, what honor it receives, and what affection it engrosses.

Let me ask myself, "What do I most love?"

If I hardly know how to answer that question, let me put to myself another, "What do I most think upon? In what channel do I usually find my thoughts flow when unrestrained?"—for thoughts flow to the idol as water to the lowest spot.

If, then, the thoughts flow continually to ...

the farm,  
the shop,  
the business,  
the investment,  
to the husband, wife, or child,  
to that which feeds lust or pride,  
worldliness or covetousness,  
self-conceit or self-admiration;  
that is the idol which, as a magnet, attracts  
the thoughts of the mind towards it.

Your idol may not be mine, nor mine yours; and yet we may both be idolaters! You may despise or even hate my idol, and wonder how I can be such a fool, or such a sinner, as to hug it to my bosom! And I may wonder how a partaker of grace can be so



inconsistent as to love such a silly idol as yours! You may condemn me, and I condemn you. And the Word of God, and the verdict of a living conscience may condemn us both.

O how various and how innumerable these idols are! One man may possess a refined taste and educated mind. Books, learning, literature, languages, general information, shall be his idol. Music—vocal and instrumental, may be the idol of a second—so sweet to his ears, such inward feelings of delight are kindled by the melodious strains of voice or instrument, that music is in all his thoughts, and hours are spent in producing those harmonious sounds which perish in their utterance. Painting, statuary, architecture, the fine arts generally, may be the Baal, the dominating passion of a third. Poetry, with its glowing thoughts, burning words, passionate utterances, vivid pictures, melodious cadence, and sustained flow of all that is beautiful in language and expression, may be the delight of a fourth. Science, the eager pursuit of a fifth. These are the highest flights of the human mind. These are not the base idols of the drunken feast, the low jest, the mirthful supper—or even that less debasing but enervating idol—sleep and indolence, as if life's highest enjoyments were those of the swine in the sty.

You middle-class people—who despise art and science, language and learning, as you despise the ale-house, and ball field—may still have an idol. Your garden, your beautiful roses, your verbenas, fuchsias, needing all the care and attention of a babe in arms, may be your idol. Or your pretty children, so admired as they walk in the street; or your new house and all the new furniture; or your son who is getting on so well in business; or your daughter so comfortably settled in life; or your dear husband so generally respected, and just now doing so nicely in the farm. Or your own still dearer SELF that needs so much feeding, and dressing and attending to.

Who shall count the thousands of idols which draw to themselves those thoughts, and engross those affections which are due to the Lord alone?

You may not be found out. Your idol may be so hidden, or so peculiar, that all our attempts to touch it, have left you and it unscathed. Will you therefore conclude that you have none? Search deeper, look closer; it is not too deep for the eye of God, nor too hidden for the eyes of a tender conscience anointed with divine eye-salve.

Hidden diseases the most incurable of all diseases. Search every fold of your heart until you find it. It may not be so big nor so ugly as your neighbor's. But an idol is still an idol, whether so small as to be carried in the coat pocket, or as large as a gigantic statue.

An idol is not to be admired for its beauty, or loathed for its ugliness—but to be hated because it is an idol. "Dear children, keep yourselves from idols." 1 John 5:21

J. C. Philpot. PEARLS.

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**1 John 5:20 Commentary**