

# 1 John 5:21 Commentary

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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			

## STUDY GUIDE

### 1 JOHN 5

What is this? On the photograph of the Observation Worksheet for this chapter you will find handwritten 5W/H questions (Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?) on each verse to help you either personally study or lead a discussion on this chapter. The questions are generally very simple and are stated in such a way as to stimulate you to observe the text to discern the answer. As a reminder, given the truth that your ultimate Teacher is the Holy Spirit, begin your time with God with prayer such as Psalm 119:12+ "Blessed are You, O LORD; Teach me Your statutes." (you can vary it with similar prayers - Ps 119:18, 26, 33, 64, 66, 68, 108, 124,

135, 171, etc) The questions are generally highlighted in yellow and the answers in green. Some questions have no answers and are left to your observations and the illuminating/teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit. Some qualifying thoughts - (1) Use "As is" - these are handwritten and will include mistakes I made, etc. (2) They may not be the best question for a given verse and my guess is that on some verses you will think of a far superior 5W/H question and/or many other questions.

Dr Howard Hendricks once gave an assignment to his seminary students to list as many observations as they could from Acts 1:8. He said "So far they've come up with more than 600 different ones! Imagine what fun you could have with 600 observations on this passage. Would you like to see Scripture with eyes like that?" (P. 63 [Living by the Book](#) - borrow) With practice you can! And needless to say, you will likely make many more observations and related questions than I recorded on the pages below and in fact I pray that the Spirit would indeed lead you to discover a veritable treasure chest of observations and questions! In Jesus' Name. Amen

Why am I doing this? **Mortimer Adler** among others helped me develop a questioning mindset as I read, seeking to read actively rather than passively. Over the years I have discovered that as I have practiced reading with a 5W/H questioning mindset, it has yielded more accurate interpretation and the good fruit of meditation. In other words, consciously interacting with the inspired Holy Word of God and the illuminating Holy Spirit has honed my ability to meditate on the Scripture, and my prayer is that this tool will have the same impact in your spiritual life. The benefits of meditation are literally priceless in regard to their value in this life and in the life to come (cf discipline yourself for godliness in 1Ti 4:8+.) For some of the benefits - see Joshua 1:8+ and Psalm 1:2-3+. It will take diligence and mental effort to develop an "inductive" ([especially an "observational"](#)), interrogative mindset as you read God's Word, but it bears repeating that the benefits in this life and the rewards in the next will make it more than worth the effort you invest! Dear Christian reader let me encourage you to strongly consider learning the skills of [inductive Bible study](#) and spending the rest of your life practicing them on the Scriptures and living them out in your daily walk with Christ.

Although Mortimer Adler's advice is from a secular perspective, his words are worth pondering...

*Strictly, all reading is active. What we call passive is simply less active. Reading is better or worse according as it is more or less active. And one reader is better than another in proportion as he is capable of a greater range of activity in reading.* (Adler's classic book [How to Read a Book is free online](#))

[John Piper](#) adds that "Insight or understanding is the product of intensive, headache-producing meditation on two or three verses and how they fit together. This kind of reflection and rumination is provoked by asking questions of the text. And you cannot do it if you hurry. Therefore, we must resist the deceptive urge to carve notches in our bibliographic gun. Take two hours to ask ten questions of Galatians 2:20+ and you will gain one hundred times the insight you would have attained by reading thirty pages of the New Testament or any other book. Slow down. Query. Ponder. Chew.... (John Dewey rightly said) "People only truly think when they are confronted with a problem. Without some kind of dilemma to stimulate thought, behavior becomes habitual rather than thoughtful."

*"Asking questions is the key to understanding."*  
--Jonathan Edwards

That said, below are the [5W/H questions](#) for each verse in this chapter (click page to enlarge). This is not neatly typed but is handwritten and was used for leading a class discussion on this chapter, so you are welcome to use it in this "as is" condition...



### 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).

Wuest - Little children, guard yourselves from the idols.

KJV 1 John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen

BGT 1 John 5:21 Τεκν α, φυλ ξατε αυτ π τ ν ε δ λων.

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

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

ESV 1 John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

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

NLT 1 John 5:21 Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts.

NRS 1 John 5:21 Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

NJB 1 John 5:21 Children, be on your guard against false gods.

NAB 1 John 5:21 Children, be on your guard against idols.

YLT 1 John 5:21 Little children, guard yourselves from the idols! Amen.

ASV 1 John 5:21 My little children, guard yourselves from idols.

- **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: BE ON HIGH ALERT FOR IDOLS!

"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]." (Amplified)

**Little children, guard** ([phulasso](#) - aorist imperative) **yourselves** (heautou - [reflexive](#)) **from** ([apo](#) - speaks of separation!) **idols** ([eidolon](#)) - **Little children** "is a tender, affectionate pastoral reminder of his personal concern for and genuine commitment to his readers in view of the dangers confronting them." (Hiebert) "Little children" also could imply that we are vulnerable and weak! **Guard** ([phulasso](#)) in the aorist imperative calls for an immediate response and speaks of a sense of urgency. Do this now. Don't delay! Phulasso is used of the garrison of a city guarding it against attack from without! 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, (Eph 5:18+) Who alone can enable us to successfully guard ourselves from idols (cp the role of the Spirit in Ro 8:13+). 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.

*Abstain from any form of worship that draws them away  
from Jesus Christ the true God and eternal life.*

**Wuest** says the verb tense ([phulasso](#) - aorist imperative) John selects "marks a crisis" quoting **Smith** who explains that "The Cerinthian heresy was a desperate assault demanding a decisive repulse" ([Eerdmans Publishing](#)) **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." **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."

*We cannot have a heavenly fellowship  
if we allow a hindering fellowship.*

-- Vance Havner

**Steven 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](#))

In 1 John 5:18+ the saints have been assured of God's supernatural keeping activity on their behalf ("*God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him*"), but now John stresses their personal responsibility in keeping themselves spiritually secure and pure (cf Jas 1:27+) (See the "[Paradoxical Principle of 100% Dependent and 100% Responsible](#)"). 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 (present tense - continually) work in you (Who is this but the Holy Spirit!), both to will and to work for [His] good pleasure. (Phil 2:12+, Phil 2:13+) (Read the NLT paraphrase of Phil 2:13NLT

= the Spirit gives us both the "**desire**" and the "**power**." Praise God! And yet we still must make the personal choice to yield our "rights" to Him! We are not robots or puppets! Notice this is not "Let go, let God," but more like "Let God, let's go!")

*The heart is a citadel, and it must be guarded  
against insidious assailants from without.*

-- [David Smith](#)

I would add to Smith's pithy quote, our heart must be guarded *even more* from assaults **WITHIN**, for our [inveterate](#) enemy, [the fallen flesh](#), lurks ever ready like a lion seeking to pounce on its unsuspecting prey (cf Cain - Ge 4:6-7 = nothing has changed!). Solomon gave a wise command (they're all wise) in Proverbs 4:23+ "**Watch** (command; Lxx = [tereo](#) in [present imperative](#) calling for continual vigilance) over your heart (Lxx = [kardia](#) - our "control center") with all diligence, for (strategic term of explanation - the reason for vigilance) from it flow the springs of life." One is also reminded of Moses warning words to the second generation of Israel who were preparing to enter the "Promised Land" to possess their promised possession - "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So **choose life** in order that (term of purpose) you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him (THIS IS THE TIMELESS ANTIDOTE FOR IDOLATRY); for (term of explanation) this is your life and the length of your days, that (term of purpose) you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them (PROMISED POSSESSIONS MUST BE PERSONALLY POSSESSED!)." (Deut 30:19-20+)

**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! And don't think you can make provision for them and they won't take advantage of that provision (see Ro 13:14+)! Making provision is not in itself necessarily sin, but it clearly opens the door for lust to walk in and commit sin!

[ESV Study Bible](#) (borrow) - Keep yourselves from idols means keep yourselves from trusting, obeying, revering, and following—that is, in effect, worshiping—anyone or anything other than God himself, and his Son Jesus Christ.

**Steven 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](#))

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). Many writers favor the idea that idols represent those false ideas about God reflected in the doctrines of the false teachers or secessionists. These differences would seem to me to be [moot](#), because idols of any genre are forbidden by a jealous God (Ex 20:4-5+) and all are seductive and deadly to our spirituality!

"The dearest idol I have known,  
Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from thy throne,  
And worship only thee.

"So shall my walk be close with God,  
Calm and serene my frame;  
So purer light shall mark the road  
That leads me to the Lamb."

**D Edmond 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!" ([1 John 5:13-21](#))

**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.

**David 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** adds that the command, however, has apparently the wider Pauline sense, to guard against everything which occupies the place of God." I tend to agree with Vincent because in 21st century America there are idols literally everywhere! And they all would seek to steal our allegiance to God!)

*An idol is anything that takes the rightful place of God in your life...*

*At the root of all of these is the idol of self.*

**Steven 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](#))

**Thompson** - An idol is a false picture of God that causes one to stumble and fall away from a relationship with the true God. The Elder's readers are to keep themselves from every kind of false belief, for loyalty to a false god leads to death, but allegiance to the true God brings eternal life. ([Concluding Assurances and Admonitions](#))

*Man's nature ...*

*is a perpetual factory of idols*

-- John Calvin

**John Calvin** on idols - "Godliness is corrupted whenever a corporeal figure is ascribed to God, or whenever statues and pictures are set up for worship....Let us therefore remember that we should be so careful to remain in the spiritual worship of God as to banish far from us everything that may turn us aside to gross and carnal superstitions."

**C H Dodd** gives the following exhortation on **idols** - "It behooves the individual Christian to be on his guard against any such God-substitute, whether it be a political idea, or some fashionable cult, or merely the product of his own 'wishful thinking.'"

**Amen** - Is added in the KJV (based on the [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 (ⲛ A B Ψ 33 323 630 1505 1739 al sy co), lack the inoffensive particle, rendering its omission as the authentic reading.

*One thing there is which should never satisfy and content us;*

*and that is, "anything that stands between our souls and Christ."*

**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." (From his article [Be Content](#))

**Warren Wiersbe** - Christians live in an atmosphere of reality. Most unsaved people live in an atmosphere of pretense and sham. Christians have been given spiritual discernment to know the true from the false, but the unsaved do not have this understanding. Christians do not simply choose between good and bad; they choose between true and false. An idol represents that which is false and empty; and a person who lives for idols will himself become false and empty. Few people today bow to idols of wood and metal. Nevertheless, other idols capture their attention and affection. Covetousness, for example, is idolatry (Col. 3:5). A man may worship his bankbook or his stock portfolio just as fervently as a so-called heathen worships his ugly idol. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy

God, and Him only shalt thou serve” (Matt. 4:10). The thing we serve is the thing we worship! Whatever controls our lives and “calls the signals” is our god. This explains why God warns us against the sin of idolatry. Not only is it a violation of His commandment (Ex. 20:1–6), but it is a subtle way for Satan to take control of us. When “things” take God’s place in our lives, we are guilty of idolatry. This means we are living for the unreal instead of for the real. To a man of the world, the Christian life is unreal and the worldly life is real. This is because a man of the world lives by what he sees and feels (things) and not by what God says in His Word. An idol is a temporal thing, Jesus Christ is eternal God. “For the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18, NASB).

Like Moses, a Christian endures “as seeing Him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27). Faith is “the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). Noah had never seen a flood, yet by faith he “saw” it coming and did what God told him to do. Abraham “saw” a heavenly city and country by faith, and was willing to forsake his own earthly home to follow God. All of the great heroes of faith named in Hebrews 11 accomplished what they did because they “saw the invisible” by faith. In other words, they were in contact with reality. The world boasts of its enlightenment, but a Christian walks in the real light, because God is light. The world talks about love, but it knows nothing of the real love which a Christian experiences because “God is love.” The world displays its wisdom and learning, but a Christian lives in truth because “the Spirit is truth.” God is light, love, and truth; and these together make a life that is real. “But it makes no difference what a man believes so long as he is sincere!” This popular excuse hardly needs refutation. Does it make any difference what the pharmacist believes, or the surgeon, or the chemist? It makes all the difference in the world!

Shed a tear for Jimmy Brown;  
Poor Jimmy is no more.  
For what he thought was H<sub>2</sub>O  
Was H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>!†

A Christian has “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thes. 1:9). Idols are dead, but Christ is the living God. Idols are false, but Christ is the true God. This is the secret of the life that is real! So John’s admonition, “Keep yourselves from idols,” can be paraphrased, “Watch out for the imitation and the artificial and be real!” ([Bible Exposition Commentary](#))

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**Little children** (5043)(**teknon**) is a tender word (last used 1Jn 4:4+) conveying the sense of “little born-ones.” **Little children** - all NT uses are by John - John 13:33; 1Jn 2:1+, 1Jn 2:12+, 1Jn 2:28+; 1Jn 3:7+, 1Jn 3:18+; 1Jn 4:4+; 1Jn 5:21. Along with **beloved**, (six time) little children is John’s preferred term of endearment. “As their spiritual adviser, if not father, it is appropriate for John to employ a term that is evocative of both his leadership role and the divine parentage and resultant sibling ties shared by readers and writer.” (Yarbrough)

**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+) 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. **Wuest** notes that **phulasso** “is used of the garrison of a city guarding it against attack from without.” [Eerdmans Publishing](#) - used by permission) **Vine - phulasso**, stronger than **tereo**, “to keep.”

**Phulasso** - 31x/31v - **abstain(1), guard(8), guarded(1), guarding(1), guards(1), keep(5), keeping(2), keeps(1), kept(4), kept under guard(1), maintain(1), observe(2), preserved(1), protect(1), watching(1).**  
Matt. 19:20; Mk. 10:20; Lk. 2:8; Lk. 8:29; Lk. 11:21; Lk. 11:28; Lk. 12:15; Lk. 18:21; Jn. 12:25; Jn. 12:47; Jn. 17:12; Acts 7:53; Acts 12:4; Acts 16:4; Acts 21:24; Acts 21:25; Acts 22:20; Acts 23:35; Acts 28:16; Rom. 2:26; Gal. 6:13; 2 Thess. 3:3; 1 Tim. 5:21; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:12; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2 Tim. 4:15; 2 Pet. 2:5; 2 Pet. 3:17; 1 Jn. 5:21; Jude 1:24

**Idols** (1497)(**eidolon** from **eidōs** = that which is seen, what is visible, figure, appearance) is primarily a phantom, form, image, shadow or likeness. The word is used in the NT to refer to the golden calf to which Israel made sacrifice (Acts 7:41) and more broadly to objects made of wood or stone or metal representing the deities of classical antiquity (Acts 15:20; Rom. 2:22; 1 Cor. 8:4, 7; 10:19; 12:2; 1 Th. 1:9; Rev. 9:20). The gospel called for believers to make a clean break with pagan idols. **Friberg** on **eidolon** - strictly form, copy, figure; hence (1) an object resembling a person or animal and worshiped as a god idol, image (Rev 9.20 ); (2) idol, false god, with reference to demonic power involved in idol worship (1Co 10.19) (BORROW [Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#))

**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. ([Vine's Expository Dictionary](#))

**EIDOLON - 11V** - Acts 7:41; Acts 15:20; Rom. 2:22; 1 Co. 8:4; 1 Co. 8:7; 1 Co. 10:19; 1 Co. 12:2; 2 Co. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Jn. 5:21; Rev. 9:20

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**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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**Danny Akin** - See [Exalting Jesus in 1,2,3 John - Page 139](#) - In a letter to a man named George Ticknor dated November 25, 1817, Thomas Jefferson was critical of state legislatures for not "perceiv[ing] the important truths that knowledge is power, that knowledge is safety, and that knowledge is happiness." One might challenge particulars of Jefferson's statement, but there is a ring of truth in it to be sure. The apostle John certainly thought knowledge was important. He was vitally concerned that his "little children" (v. 21) know a number of things to be true because they had come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. In fact, a quick survey of this five-chapter letter reveals at least the following things we can know:

1. We can know that we know God (1 John 2:3, 13, 14; 1 John 4:7).
2. We can know that we are in God (1 John 2:5).
3. We can know that it is the last hour (1 John 2:18).
4. We can know the truth (1 John 2:21; 1 John 3:19).
5. We can know that Jesus is righteous (1 John 2:29).
6. We can know that we will be like Jesus (1 John 3:2).
7. We can know that Jesus came to take away sins (1 John 3:5).
8. We can know that Jesus is sinless (1 John 3:5).
9. We can know that we have passed out of death into life (1 John 3:14).
10. We can know that no murderer has eternal life (1 John 3:15).
11. We can know love (1 John 3:16; 1 John 4:16).
12. We can know that God abides in us (1 John 3:24; 1 John 4:13).
13. We can know the Spirit of God (1 John 4:2).
14. We can know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of deception (1 John 4:6).
15. We can know that we love God's children (1 John 5:2).
16. We can know that we have eternal life (1 John 5:13).
17. We can know that God answers prayer (1 John 5:15).
18. We can know that we will not practice sin (1 John 5:18).
19. We can know that we belong to God (1 John 5:19).
20. We can know that the Son of God has come (1 John 5:20).
21. We can know that the Son of God has given us understanding (1 John 5:20).
22. We can know Him who is true (1 John 5:20).

It is clear from 1 John alone that the child of God can know and be certain of quite a lot!

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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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**Vance Havner** - If we are to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and if an idol is something we love more than we love God or something we love too much, then we must get rid of our idols if we are to love God as we ought.

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### **Matthew Henry - 1 John 5:21**

It is wrong for believers to join with the wicked and profane. The word unbeliever applies to all destitute of true faith. True pastors will caution their beloved children in the gospel, not to be unequally yoked. The fatal effects of neglecting Scripture precepts as to marriages clearly appear. Instead of a help meet, the union brings a snare. Those whose cross it is to be unequally united, without their willful fault, may expect consolation under it; but when believers enter into such unions, against the express warnings of God’s word, they must expect distress. The caution also extends to common conversation. We should not join in friendship and acquaintance with wicked men and unbelievers. Though we cannot wholly avoid seeing and hearing, and being with such, yet we should never choose them for friends. We must not defile ourselves by converse with those who defile themselves with sin. Come out from the workers of iniquity, and separate from their vain and sinful pleasures and pursuits; from all conformity to the corruptions of this present evil world. If it is an envied privilege to be the son or daughter of an earthly prince, who can express the dignity and happiness of being sons and daughters of the Almighty? There is a great deal of danger in communicating with unbelievers and idolaters, danger of being defiled and of being rejected; therefore the exhortation is to come out from among them, and keep at a due distance, to be separate, as one would avoid the society of those who have the leprosy or the plague, for fear of taking infection, and not to touch the unclean thing, lest we be defiled. Who can touch pitch, and not be defiled by it?

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### **Kossi’s Courage**

You shall have no other gods before me. . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them. Exodus 20:3, 5

As he awaited his baptism in Togo’s Mono River, Kossi stooped to pick up a worn wooden carving. His family had worshiped the object for generations. Now they watched as he tossed the grotesque figure into a fire prepared for the occasion. No longer would their choicest chickens be sacrificed to this god.

In the West, most Christians think of idols as metaphors for what they put in place of God. In Togo, West Africa, idols represent literal gods that must be appeased with sacrifice. Idol burning and baptism make a courageous statement about a new believer’s allegiance to the one true God.

You shall have no other gods before me. Exodus 20:3

As an eight-year-old, King Josiah came to power in an idol-worshiping, sex-obsessed culture. His father and grandfather had been



two of the worst kings in all of Judah's sordid history. Then the high priest discovered the book of the law. When the young king heard its words, he took them to heart (2 Kings 22:8–13). Josiah destroyed the pagan altars, burned the vile items dedicated to the goddess Asherah, and stopped the ritual prostitution (ch. 23). In place of these practices, he celebrated the Passover (23:21–23).

Whenever we look for answers apart from God—consciously or subconsciously—we pursue a false god. It would be wise to ask ourselves: What idols, literal or figurative, do we need to throw on the fire?

Lord, forgive us for those things we turn to that show our hearts are not focused on You. Show us what we need to give up, and replace it with the presence of Your Holy Spirit.

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

INSIGHT: Ask God to help you see false trusts that are robbing you of the joy of living in the presence and joy of the One whose mercy and love are more real and sure than the air we breathe. (Reprinted by permission from [Our Daily Bread Ministries](#). Please do not repost the full devotional without their permission.)

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## James Smith - "AMEN" TO JOHN'S STRANGE COMMAND 1 JOHN 5:21

### I. What is an Idol?

1. This "Amen" must be considered as not merely a fitting conclusion to the Epistle, but as a heartfelt desire concerning this last command.
2. We might be inclined to think this has no application to us.
3. There is much idolatry to-day even in England.
  - a. Of course there is to-day Image worship. We would do as John Knox did, when lying in irons in the French Galley. He was asked to worship an image of the Virgin Mary, but he flung it overboard, declaring it was "but a pented brod"—a painted board.
  - b. There can be idolatrous systems of worship. The following of any man-made religion is idolatry. "All worshipping, honouring, or service of God invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express command, is idolatry," said John Knox in later life.
  - c. Dr. Torrey said: "That which a man thinks most of—that is his god. It may be money, position, or pleasure."

### II. Who are the "Little Children?"

1. 1 John 2:12, 13 and 14 decides.
2. Observe three stages of growth:
  - a. Spiritual babyhood, or infancy.
  - b. Spiritual youth.
  - c. Spiritual maturity.
3. Little children are in particular need of a word about forgiveness (2:12), victory over sin (2:1), power of overcoming (4:4), etc.

III. "Keep yourselves." Let God have His rightful place in your hearts and life.

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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.

—Charles Tindley

([Play this great hymn](#))

**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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### Henry Mahan - Keep Yourselves From Idols

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

Keep yourselves from anything or anyone that would occupy the place in your heart, affections, and thoughts due to God alone! Keep yourselves from images, superstitions, traditions, religious practices, and religious observances which are not according to the Scriptures and glorifying to God alone. "We worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3)

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

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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.

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nicely in the farm. Or your own still dearer SELF that needs so much feeding, and dressing and attending to.

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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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**Robert Morgan - The 66¢ Solution** - borrow [From this verse](#)

Missionaries Dick Hillis and Margaret Humphrey were married on April 18, 1938, in a little house in Hankow, China. The only wedding music was the percussion of Japanese bombs in the distance. They moved into a drab, mud-brick house and settled into a flurry of missionary activity.

Seven months later, Margaret showed symptoms of fever. It rapidly worsened, and Dick anguished as it rose to 103 degrees, then to 105. With no doctor in the village and no adequate transportation to the distant hospital, he felt helpless. He prayed, but sensed no response from God. Why? Why doesn't God answer? He couldn't take her from me. He knows I need her, not just for myself, but for the work also.

As he knelt by Margaret's bed gripping her torrid hand, a sentence came to mind from a letter his father had written before his marriage: "Remember, Dick, if you are really in love, you will face the danger of loving the gift more than the Giver."

"Oh, God," Dick cried, "You have given me so much to love in Margaret. Is it possible I have loved her too much?" The closing words of 1 John flashed to mind: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

Knowing the Lord was working deeply in his heart, Dick knelt a long time, praying. "Lord, I give Margaret back to You. If You require it, I will walk to her grave, still trusting You. But if You will raise her up, I will always seek to put You first."

Peace came over him, allowing him to rest. The next morning when Margaret's temperature still hovered at 105 degrees, Dick decided to visit the local Chinese herb shop. The aged proprietor there found a small glass vial that a traveling medicine man had

sold him two years previously. It was supposed to reduce fever. Dick purchased the solution for sixty-six cents, then hurried home and gave Margaret the injection. Her temperature began going down, and two weeks later she was good as new. \*

Today's Suggested Reading 1 John 5:18–21

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**Daily Light on the Daily Path** - "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you and direct your heart to the Lord and serve him only."

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.—"Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty."—"You cannot serve God and money."

"You shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."—"Serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought."

Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being, and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.—"Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."—Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.

1 Sam. 7:3; 1 John 5:21; 2 Cor. 6:17–18; Matt. 6:24; Ex. 34:14; 1 Chron. 28:9; Ps. 51:6; 1 Sam. 16:7; 1 John 3:21

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**Daily Light on the Daily Path** - Keep yourselves from idols.

My son, give me your heart.—Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.—"Son of man, these men have taken their idols into their hearts, and set the stumbling block of their iniquity before their faces. Should I indeed let myself be consulted by them?"—Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.—But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things.—If riches increase, set not your heart on them.—My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver.—"Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."—"The Lord looks on the heart."

1 John 5:21; Prov. 23:26; Col. 3:2; Ezek. 14:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Tim. 6:9–11; Ps. 62:10; Prov. 8:19; Matt. 6:21; 1 Sam. 16:7

My children, keep yourselves from false gods. (1 John 5:21)

The apostle John warned the Christians of his day to keep themselves from idols. Idolatry was common in the pagan world of his day. It is common still in other forms in our own time:

in the worship of money and possessions,  
in the worship of success and fame,  
in the worship of pleasure and sport,  
in the worship of man instead of the living and true God.

Let us search our own hearts and then pray to the Lord;

[The dearest idol I have known,](#)

Whate'er that idol be,  
Help me to tear it from thy throne,  
And worship only thee.

William Cowper

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**Keep Yourselves from Idols 1 John 5:21**

What are the idols of which the Apostle speaks?... The preceding words [5:20] show us the meaning of these. "This is the true God,"—the end of all the souls he has made, the centre of all created spirits;—"and eternal life,"—the only foundation of present as well as eternal happiness. To him therefore, alone, our heart is due.... And to give our heart to any other is plain idolatry. Accordingly, whatever takes our heart from him, or shares it with him, is an idol; or, in other words, whatever we seek happiness in independent of God....

How may we keep ourselves from [idols]?... First, be deeply convinced that none of them bring happiness; that nothing, no person

under the sun, no, nor the amassment of all together, can give any solid, satisfactory happiness to any child of man....

When you are thoroughly convinced of this, I advise secondly, stand and consider what you are about.... Steadily resolve to seek happiness where it may be found; where it cannot be sought in vain. Resolve to seek it in the true God, the fountain of all blessedness; and cut off all delay! Straightway put in execution what you have resolved....

But do not either resolve, or attempt to execute your resolution, trusting in your own strength. If you do, you will be utterly foiled.... Cry, therefore, to the Strong for strength.... Pray that you may be fully discovered to yourself; that you may know yourself as also you are known. When once you are possessed of this genuine conviction, all your idols will lose their charms. And you will wonder how you could so long lean upon those broken reeds, which had so often sunk under you. (WJW)(Spirit Filled LIfe Daily Devotional Bible)

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### **John Bennett - 1 John 5:21 KEEP YOURSELVES FROM IDOLS**

'Little children, keep yourselves from idols (false gods)'. John closes his letter by describing believers with his own unique term of endearment and intimacy, calling them, 'little children'. It has been described as 'John's tender address'. It is not difficult to see in this endearment employed by the aged apostle a reflection of the infinitely more tender heart of our loving Father God. How He cares for us, and yearns over us with love!

John has just brought his epistle to a close with a three-fold description in verses 18–20 of the character of the 'dear children' he has been addressing. (1) They do not continue in sin. (2) They belong indissolubly to God. (3) They have the certainty of knowing and abiding in the real God through the saving work of His Son Jesus Christ. This is reality and positive truth, therefore they are to avoid all sham and keep themselves from idols! They have absolute truth in the Father and the Son, therefore steer clear of everything that is false and unreal.

What is meant by 'idols' in this verse? Without a doubt it includes the literal meaning of pagan images. Ephesus, from where John wrote his epistle, was famous as a centre of idolatry and was home to the world famed temple of Artemis or Diana, Acts 19:28. Believers were always under pressure from idolatrous forces and cults with their charms and superstitions, as well as from food offered to idols in the markets. This prohibition would be a preservative too from Roman Catholic images, pictures, medal-charms, and superstitions today. But while this may be the literal meaning of idols, the term may also be applied to what someone described thus: 'Idolatry is anything which fills the place in the understanding, the heart, or the life, which is due to God alone'. How important that we pay serious heed to John's warning, 'guard yourselves from false gods'.

What idols we may cherish in our hearts usurping the place of our lovely Lord! We may make an idol of someone we love, husband, wife, or child. Some make gods of themselves, caring only for their own pleasure and interests. Some worship sport, making it the supreme object of their lives! Others ambition, money, or fame. 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols'!

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### **THE SUPREME PLACE IN OUR AFFECTIONS - [NIV, Once-A-Day: Walk with Jesus: 365 Days in the New Testament](#)**

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

While few people bow before tree stumps or stone pillars today, that doesn't mean idolatry is a thing of the past. As one commentator stated, "Most of the gods of this world are composed of tinted glass, baked-on enamel, chrome, Dacron, wool, silk, or alligator leather."

Albert Barnes examines some of the subtle ways in which devotion for God can be misdirected—with disastrous consequences.

#### **WALK WITH ALBERT BARNES**

"We are not in danger, indeed, of bowing down to idols. But we may be in danger of substituting other things in our affections in the place of God, and of devoting to them the time and the affection which are due to him. It is possible to love even our children with an attachment as shall effectually exclude the true God from the heart. And we may love the world with an attachment such as an idolator would his idol-gods.

"There is practical idolatry all over the world.

"God should have the supreme place in our affections. The love of everything else should be held in subordination to the love of him.

"He should reign in our hearts; be acknowledged in our families; be submitted to at all times as having a right to command and control us; be obeyed in all expressions of his will; and be so loved that we shall be willing to part without a murmur with the dearest object of affection when he takes it from us."

#### **WALK CLOSER TO GOD**

"God or "



Is there anything you might put in that blank that would cause you to think twice about the choice?

If so, now is the time to call it what it is—an idol—and to deal with it accordingly.

If not, ask God for an undivided and undiminishing love for him.

There's no better way to "keep yourselves from idols" than to keep yourself wholly his.

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## John Wesley - SPIRITUAL IDOLATRY

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

1. There are two words that occur several times in this Epistle,—*paidia* and *teknia*, both of which our translators render by the same expression, little children. But their meaning is very different. The former is very properly rendered little children; for it means, babes in Christ, those that have lately tasted of his love, and are, as yet, weak and unestablished therein. The latter might with more propriety be rendered, beloved children; as it does not denote any more than the affection of the speaker to those whom he had begotten in the Lord.

2. An ancient historian relates, that when the Apostle was so enfeebled by age as not to be able to preach, he was frequently brought into the congregation in his chair, and just uttered, Beloved children, love one another. he could not have given a more important advice. And equally important is this which lies before us; equally necessary for every part of the Church of Christ. Beloved children, keep yourselves from idols.

3. Indeed there is a close connexion between them: one cannot subsist without the other. As there is no firm foundation for the love of our brethren except the love of God, so there is no possibility of loving God except we keep ourselves from idols. But what are the idols of which the Apostle speaks? This is the First thing to be considered. We may then, in the Second place, inquire, how shall we keep ourselves from them?

1. We are, First to consider, What are the idols of which the Apostle speaks? I do not conceive him to mean, at least not principally, the idols that were worshipped by the heathens. They to whom he was writing, whether they had been Jews or Heathens, were not in much danger from these. There is no probability that the Jews now converted had ever been guilty of worshipping them: As deeply given to this gross idolatry as the Israelites had been for many ages, they were hardly ever entangled therein after their return from the Babylonish captivity. From that period the whole body of Jews had shown a constant, deep abhorrence of it: And the Heathens, after they had once turned to the living God, had their former idols in the utmost detestation. They abhorred to touch the unclean thing; yea, they chose to lay down their lives rather than turn to the worship of those gods whom they now knew to be devils.

2. Neither can we reasonably suppose, that he speaks of those idols that are now worshipped in the Church of Rome; whether angels, or the souls of departed saints, or images of gold, silver, wood or stone. None of these idols were known in the Christian Church till some centuries after the time of the Apostles. once, indeed, St. John himself fell down to worship before the face of an angel that spake unto him; probably mistaking him, from his glorious appearance, for the Great Angel of the Covenant; but the strong reproof of the angel, which immediately followed, secured the Christians from imitating that bad example: "See thou do it not. As glorious as I appear, I am not thy Master. 'I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren the Prophets: Worship God.'" (Rev. 22:9.)

3. Setting then pagan and Romish idols aside, what are those of which we are here warned by the Apostle? The preceding words show us the meaning of these. "This is the true God,"—the end of all the souls he has made, the centre of all created spirits;—"and eternal life,"—the only foundation of present as well as eternal happiness. To him, therefore, alone, our heart is due. And he cannot, he will not, quit his claim, or consent to its being given to any other. He is continually saying to every child of man, "My son, give me thy heart!" And to give our heart to any other is plain idolatry. Accordingly, whatever takes our heart from him, or shares it with him, is an idol; or, in other words, whatever we seek happiness in independent of God.

4. Take an instance that occurs almost every day: A person who has been long involved in the world, surrounded and fatigued with abundance of business, having at length acquired an easy fortune, disengages himself from all business, and retires into the country,—to be happy. Happy in what? Why, in taking his ease. For he intends now,

*Somno et inertibus horis*

*Ducere sollicitae jucunda obliviae vitae:*

To sleep, and pass away,

In gentle inactivity the day!

Happy in eating and drinking whatever his heart desires: perhaps more elegant fare than that of the old Roman, who feasted his imagination before the treat was served up; who, before he left the town, consoled himself with the thought of "fat bacon and cabbage too!"

Uncta satis pingui ponentur oluscula lardo!

Happy,—in altering, enlarging, rebuilding, or at least decorating, the old mansion-house he has purchased; and likewise in improving everything about it; the stables, out-houses, grounds. But, mean time, where does God come in? No where at all. He did not think about him. He no more thought of the King of heaven, than of the King of France. God is not in his plan. The knowledge and love of God are entirely out of the question. Therefore, this whole scheme of happiness in retirement is idolatry, from beginning to end.

5. If we descend to particulars, the first species of this idolatry is what St. John terms, the desire of the flesh. We are apt to take this in too narrow a meaning, as if it related to one of the senses only. Not so: this expression equally refers to all the outward senses. It means, the seeking happiness in the gratification of any or all of the external senses; although more particularly of the three lower senses,—tasting, smelling, and feeling. It means, the seeking happiness herein, if not in a gross, indelicate manner, by open intemperance, by gluttony or drunkenness, or shameless debauchery; yet, in a regular kind of epicurism; in a genteel sensuality; in such an elegant course of self-indulgence as does not disorder either the head or the stomach; as does not at all impair our health, or blemish our reputation.

6. But we must not imagine this species of idolatry is confined to the rich and great. In this also, “the toe of the peasant” (as our poet speaks) “treads upon the heel of the courtier.” Thousands in low as well as in high life sacrifice to this idol; seeking their happiness (though in a more humble manner) in gratifying their outward senses. It is true, their meat, their drink, and the objects that gratify their other senses, are of a coarser kind. But still they make up all the happiness they either have or seek, and usurp the hearts which are due to God.

7. The second species of idolatry mentioned by the Apostle is, the desire of the eye: That is, the seeking happiness in gratifying the imagination; (chiefly by means of the eyes;) that internal sense, which is as natural to men as either sight or hearing. This is gratified by such objects as are either grand, or beautiful, or uncommon. But as to grand objects, it seems they do not please any longer than they are new. Were we to survey the Pyramids of Egypt daily for a year, what pleasure would they then give? Nay, what pleasure does a far grander object than these,—

The ocean rolling on the shelly shore,

give to one who has been long accustomed to it? Yea, what pleasure do we generally receive from the grandest object in the universe,—

Yon ample, azure sky,  
Terribly large, and wonderfully bright,  
With stars unnumberd, and unmeasured light?

8. Beautiful objects are the next general source of the pleasures of the imagination: The works of nature in particular. So persons in all ages have been delighted

With sylvan scenes, and hill and dale,  
And liquid lapse of murmuring streams.

others are pleased with adding art to nature; as in gardens, with their various ornaments: others with mere works of art; as buildings, and representations of nature, whether in statues or paintings. Many likewise find pleasure in beautiful apparel, or furniture of various kinds. But novelty must be added to beauty, as well as grandeur, or it soon palls upon the sense.

9. Are we to refer to the head of beauty, the pleasure which many take in a favourite animal? Suppose a sparrow, a parrot, a cat, a lap-dog? Sometimes it may be owing to this. At other times, none but the person pleased can find any beauty at all in the favourite. Nay, perchance it is, in the eyes of all other persons, superlatively ugly. In this case, the pleasure seems to arise from mere whim or caprice; that is, madness.

10. Must we not refer to the head of novelty, chiefly, the pleasure found in most diversions and amusements; which were we to repeat them daily but a few months would be utterly flat and insipid? To the same head we may refer the pleasure that is taken in collecting curiosities; whether they are natural or artificial, whether old or new. This sweetens the labour of the virtuoso, and makes all his labour light.

11. But it is not chiefly to novelty that we are to impute the pleasure we receive from music. Certainly this has an intrinsic beauty, as well as frequently an intrinsic grandeur. This is a beauty and grandeur of a peculiar kind, not easy to be expressed; nearly related to the sublime and the beautiful in poetry, which give an exquisite pleasure. And yet it may be allowed, that novelty heightens the pleasure which arises from any of these sources.

12. From the study of languages, from criticism, and from history, we receive a pleasure of a mixed nature. In all these, there is

always something new; frequently something beautiful or sublime. And history not only gratifies the imagination in all these respects, but likewise pleases us by touching our passions; our love, desire, joy, pity. The last of these gives us a strong pleasure, though strangely mixed with a kind of pain. So that one need not wonder at the exclamation of a fine poet,—

What is all mirth but turbulence unholy,  
When to the charms compared of heavenly melancholy?

13. The love of novelty is immeasurably gratified by experimental philosophy; and, indeed, by every branch of natural philosophy; which opens an immense field for still new discoveries. But is there not likewise a pleasure therein, as well as in mathematical and metaphysical studies, which does not result from the imagination, but from the exercise of the understanding? unless we will say, that the newness of the discoveries which we make by mathematical or metaphysical researches is one reason at least, if not the chief, of the pleasure we receive therefrom.

14. I dwell the longer on these things, because so very few see them in the true point of view. The generality of men, and more particularly men of sense and learning, are so far from suspecting that there is, or can be, the least harm in them, that they seriously believe it is matter of great praise to give ourselves wholly to them. Who of them, for instance, would not admire and commend the indefatigable industry of that great philosopher who says, "I have been now eight-and-thirty years at my parish of Upminster; and I have made it clear, that there are no less than three-and-fifty species of butterflies therein: But if God should spare my life a few years longer, I do not doubt but I should demonstrate, there are five-and-fifty!" I allow that most of these studies have their use, and that it is possible to use without abusing them. But if we seek our happiness in any of these things, then it commences an idol. And the enjoyment of it, however it may be admired and applauded by the world, is condemned by God as neither better nor worse than damnable idolatry.

15. The third kind of love of the world, the Apostle speaks of under that uncommon expression, he *alazoneia ta biou*. This is rendered by our translators, the pride of life. It is usually supposed to mean, the pomp and splendour of those that are in high life. But has it not a more extensive sense? Does it not rather mean, the seeking happiness in the praise of men, which, above all things engenders pride? When this is pursued in a more pompous way by kings or illustrious men, we call it "thirst for glory;" when it is sought in a lower way by ordinary men, it is styled, "taking care of our reputation." In plain terms, it is seeking the honour that cometh of men, instead of that which cometh of God only.

16. But what creates a difficulty here is this: We are required not only to "give no offence to anyone," and to "provide things honest in the sight of all men," but to "please all men for their good to edification." But how difficult is it to do this, with a single eye to God! We ought to do all that in us lies, to prevent "the good that is in us from being evil spoken of." Yea, we ought to value a clear reputation, if it be given us, only less than a good conscience. But yet, if we seek our happiness therein, we are liable to perish in our idolatry.

17. To which of the preceding heads is the love of money to be referred? Perhaps sometimes to one, and sometimes to another; as it is a means of procuring gratifications, either for "the desire of the flesh," for "the desire of the eyes," or for "the pride of life." In any of these cases, money is only pursued in order to a farther end. But it is sometimes pursued for its own sake, without any farther view. One who is properly a miser loves and seeks money for its own sake. He looks no farther, but places his happiness in the acquiring or the possessing of it. And this is a species of idolatry distinct from all the preceding; and indeed, the lowest, basest idolatry of which the human soul is capable. To seek happiness either in gratifying this or any other of the desires above mentioned, is effectually to renounce the true God, and to set up an idol in his place. In a word, so many objects as there are in the world, wherein men seek happiness instead of seeking it in God, so many idols they set up in their hearts, so many species of idolatry they practise.

18. I would take notice of only one more, which, though it in some measure falls in with several of the preceding, yet, in many respects, is distinct from them all; I mean the idolizing a human creature. Undoubtedly it is the will of God that we should all love one another. It is his will that we should love our relations and our Christian brethren with a peculiar love; and those in particular, whom he has made particularly profitable to our souls. These we are commanded to "love fervently;" yet still "with a pure heart." But is not this "impossible with man?" to retain the strength and tenderness of affection, and yet, without any stain to the soul, with unspotted purity? I do not mean only unspotted by lust. I know this is possible. I know a person may have an unutterable affection for another without any desire of this kind. But is it without idolatry? Is it not loving the creature more than the Creator? Is it not putting a man or woman in the place of God? giving them your heart? Let this be carefully considered, even by those whom God has joined together; by husbands and wives, parents and children. It cannot be denied, that these ought to love one another tenderly: they are commanded so to do. But they are neither commanded nor permitted to love one another idolatrously. Yet how common is this! How frequently is a husband, a wife, a child, put in the place of God. How many that are accounted good Christians fix their affections on each other, so as to leave no place for God! They seek their happiness in the creature, not in the Creator. One may truly say to the other,

I view thee, lord and end of my desires.

That is, "I desire nothing more but thee! Thou art the thing that I long for! All my desire is unto thee, and unto the remembrance of thy name." Now, if this is not flat idolatry, I cannot tell what is.

II. Having largely considered what those idols are of which the Apostle speaks, I will come now to inquire (which may be done more briefly) how we may keep ourselves from them.

1. In order to this, I would advise you, First, be deeply convinced that none of them bring happiness; that no thing, no person under the sun, no, nor the amassment of all together, can give any solid, satisfactory happiness to any child of man. The world itself, the giddy, thoughtless world, acknowledge this unawares, while they allow, nay, vehemently maintain, "No man upon earth is contented." The very same observation was made near two thousand years ago:—

Nemo quam sibi sortem  
Seu ratio dederit, seu fors objecerit, illa  
Contentus vivat.

Let fortune or let choice the station give  
To man, yet none on earth contented live.

And if no man upon earth is contented, it is certain no man is happy. For whatever station we are in, discontent is incompatible with happiness.

2. Indeed not only the giddy, but the thinking, part of the world allow that no man is contented; the melancholy proofs of which we see on every side, in high and low, rich and poor. And, generally, the more understanding they have, the more discontented they are. For,

They know with more distinction to complain,  
And have superior sense in feeling pain.

It is true, every one has (to use the cant term of the day, and an excellent one it is) his hobby-horse; something that pleases the great boy for a few hours or days, and wherein he hopes to be happy! But though

Hope blooms eternal in the human breast;  
Man never is, but always to be, blest.

Still he is walking in a vain shadow, which will soon vanish away! So that universal experience, both our own, and that of all our friends and acquaintance, clearly proves, that as God made our hearts for himself, so they cannot rest till they rest in him; that till we acquaint ourselves with him, we cannot be at peace. As "a scorner" of the wisdom of God "seeketh wisdom, and findeth it not;" so a scorner of happiness in God seeketh happiness, but findeth none.

3. When you are thoroughly convinced of this, I advise you, Secondly, stand and consider what you are about. Will you be a fool and a madman all your days? Is it not high time to come to your senses! At length, awake out of sleep, and shake yourself from the dust! Break loose from this miserable idolatry, and "choose the better part!" Steadily resolve to seek happiness where it may be found; where it cannot be sought in vain. Resolve to seek it in the true God, the fountain of all blessedness; and cut off all delay! Straightway put in execution what you have resolved! Seeing "all things are ready," "acquaint thyself now with him, and be at peace."

4. But do not either resolve, or attempt to execute your resolution, trusting in your own strength. If you do, you will be utterly foiled. You are not able to contend with the evil world, much less with your own evil heart; and least of all, with the powers of darkness. Cry, therefore, to the Strong for strength. Under a deep sense of your own weakness and helplessness, trust thou in the Lord Jehovah, in whom is everlasting strength. I advise you to cry to him for repentance in particular; not only for a full consciousness of your own impotence, but for a piercing sense of the exceeding guilt, baseness, and madness of the idolatry that has long swallowed you up. Cry for a thorough knowledge of yourself; of all your sinfulness and guiltiness. Pray that you may be fully discovered to yourself; that you may know yourself as also you are known. When once you are possessed of this genuine conviction, all your idols will lose their charms. And you will wonder, how you could so long lean upon those broken reeds, which had so often sunk under you.

5. What should you ask for next?

"Jesus, now I have lost my all,  
Let me upon thy bosom fall!

Now let me see thee in thy vesture dipped in blood!

Now stand in all thy wounds confest,  
And wrap me in thy crimson vest!

Hast thou not said, 'If thou canst believe, thou shalt see the glory of God?' Lord, I would believe! Help thou mine unbelief. And help me now! Help me now to enter into the rest that remaineth for the people of God; for those who give thee their heart, their whole heart; who receive thee as their God and their All. O thou that art fairer than the children of men, full of grace are thy lips! Speak that I may see thee! And as the shadows flee before the sun, so let all my idols vanish at thy presence!"

6. From the moment that you begin to experience this, fight the good fight of faith; take the kingdom of heaven by violence! Take it as it were by storm! Deny yourself every pleasure that you are not divinely conscious brings you nearer to God. Take up your cross daily: Regard no pain, if it lies in your way to him. If you are called thereto, scruple not to pluck out the right eye, and to cast it from you. Nothing is impossible to him that believeth: You can do all things through Christ that strengtheneth you. Do valiantly; and stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free. Yea, go on in his name, and in the power of his might, till you "know all that love of God that passeth knowledge:" And then you have only to wait till he shall call you into his everlasting kingdom!

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**Benjamin L Merkle** - Those who claim to be Christians but do not believe the truth concerning Jesus, do not live a righteous life in obeying God's commands, and do not love others are in danger of idol worship. This is an idol because they have created a religion that is false. This is a religion that man has created and not that of the apostolic faith. This is nothing short of idolatry. To embrace a form of Christianity that allows one to deny the truth about Jesus, not live a godly life, or not love others, is to create an idol—and that is something all Christians must constantly guard against. (["What Is the Meaning of 'Idols'?"](#) 1Jn 5:21)

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### **Vance Havner - Sin and Its Creeping Effect**

Little children, keep yourselves from idols.—1 John 5:21

When the apostle John was on the island of Patmos, he received seven messages to the seven churches in Asia. His spirit had been pierced by Jesus' words, and he vividly recalled the Lord's loving rebuke concerning the sin that was trying to creep back into some of those congregations. John knew from Christ's words that idolatry was trying to seep into the Church. The apostle understood that the willingness of believers to compromise jeopardized the Church's holiness, weakened the power of the Holy Spirit among them, and nullified their witness for Christ. Thus, the apostle solemnly admonished them, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

This was a strong admonition for believers to guard their lives against evil that was looking for a way to get back into the mainstream of their lives. John instructed his readers to "keep" themselves from idols and the disastrous implications of idolatrous worship—which was connected with all types of sinful, sexual, riotous behavior. Since First John 5:21 is the living Word of God, it also speaks to you and me: We are to "keep" ourselves from insidious evil and sin that would try to creep back into our own lives.

The word "keep" in this verse is the Greek word *phulasso*, a word that occurs at least 400 times in the Old Testament Septuagint and 31 times in the New Testament. In each instance, the usage of this word is indisputable. It describes the guarding and protecting of a thing, such as the guarding of a house, property, possessions, or even graves, and it denotes the alertness and sleeplessness of the person who is on guard. The word *phulasso* could also imply the safekeeping of something entrusted to someone, and it was often used in a military sense to describe a garrison, a guard, or a sentinel. To "keep" (*phulasso*) something demanded that a person be loyal to the task—never lethargic or lackadaisical. If that individual "fell asleep on the job," the consequences could be grave; therefore, he must be on full alert at all times.

The Greek word *phulasso* means we are to remain wide awake and stay on course to the very end. We are to defend ourselves against the evil just as a garrison defends a strategic position. We are to be the sentinels of our lives and of the Church.

When John commanded his readers to "... keep yourself from idols ...," he was urging them to stay on alert regarding the danger of idolatry and sin. The tense used in First John 5:21 stresses continuous responsibility, which indicates this vigilance must be constantly maintained. Idolatry and other sin—and all their insidious effects—were so close that the believers needed to continually stay alert in order to remain free from their contaminating effects. It was absolutely essential that they stood firm, steadfastly refusing to compromise in the face of worldly pressures.

The believers in the First Century were surrounded with temptation. Pagan temples abounded with perverse sexual practices connected with idolatry. Those pagan temples were hotbeds of demonic activity and sinful actions. In order for Christians to stay free, they had to decide to stay free—that meant deliberately avoiding contact with these places. If they didn't maintain an alert attitude and stay continually alert, idolatry would creep back into their midst with devastating consequences. This is the reason why John called on believers to "keep" themselves from it—that is, to protect themselves from idols and to stay continuously alert about

the need to be vigilant against idolatry's temptations.

Likewise, we must take John's words to our hearts and realize that it is our responsibility to protect ourselves from sin that would try to creep back into our lives. The world is full of sin—and as time progresses, the sin will get darker and more depraved. Society (without God) is gravitating toward normalizing even the most debased base instincts in order to make these things acceptable in society. Hence, it is essential that you and I stay fully alert to the creeping effects of sin.

We may not have actual idols to deal with in today's modern world, but sin is still a reality—and believers must avoid the pull to compromise with a world that is drifting further and further from the absolute truths of God's Word. Regardless of what the world says is acceptable, we still have an unchangeable compass—the Bible—which serves as our absolute and final authority in these last days until Jesus returns for His Church. Until then, we must hide the Word of God in our hearts so we do not sin against God (see Psalm 119:11).

You are the guardian and overseer over your heart, and it is up to you to make sure your heart stays sensitive to the Holy Spirit and to God's Word by setting aside time each day to spend with Him. It is up to you to do all you can to "keep" yourself from the creeping effects of sin in this crucial hour. And here's the good news: You are well able to remain steadfast and pure in every area of your life, because through Jesus, you have everything you need to hold on to that victorious testimony!

#### MY PRAYER FOR TODAY

Father, I hear what You are saying to me, and I take this responsibility deep into my heart. You have called me to be the guardian and sentinel of my life and to retain this vigilant position until the end of my spiritual journey. Forgive me for times when I have been spiritually slack. I pray for the Holy Spirit to empower me to remain alert and wide awake and to stay on track—completely unresponsive to and unaffected by sin and its creeping effects that are in the world. Regardless of what the world and society may say or do, I thank You for Your continual supply of supernatural strength to draw upon, Father, to keep myself from sin and to live my life according to Your Word.

I pray this in Jesus' name!

#### MY CONFESSION FOR TODAY

I confess that I am dedicated to obeying the Word of God and that I do not allow society or the world around me to dictate what is right or wrong. Sin is looking for a way to creep back into my life—and into the lives of all believers—but I have determined that I will remain on guard, as a sentinel of my life. God expects this of me and will hold me responsible for keeping my life free from the contaminant of sin and its creeping effects. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I will walk with God in a manner that is pleasing to Him and that is free of the sinful influence of the world.

I declare this by faith in Jesus' name!

#### QUESTIONS FOR YOU TO CONSIDER

1. Do you know any believers who have been morally compromised by the world and the thinking of society? As you consider their waywardness, what were the early signs that showed sin was creeping back into their minds and lives again?
2. What do you need to do to "keep" yourself from the moral and spiritual contamination that is in the world? What steps do you need to take to build a strong spiritual barrier between you and the creeping effects of sin?
3. Are there any areas where you've already been affected by the world? If so, what do you need to do to reverse this trend, to cleanse your life of it, and to get back on the straight and narrow path with the Lord?

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### James Hastings - THE PERIL OF IDOLATRY

My little children, guard yourselves from idols.—1 John 5:21.

(Note ¶ identifies an illustration, quote, etc)

THESE would seem to be the last words of Scripture that were written, the last charge of the last Apostle, the last solemn warning in which the Holy Spirit sums up the Gospel for all generations. Yet they sound strange. Surely we have no idols. What need have we of such a charge as this?

Not much, if wood and stone are needed to make an idol; but if we are putting anything whatever in God's place, we are not so clear. Some calling themselves Christians have worshipped saints on every high hill and under every green tree; some have made the Church an idol, and some the Bible; some have made money their god, others have worshipped success, and others have sold themselves for pleasure.<sup>1</sup>

¶ It may well be that the Spirit had brought before St. John's mind the danger arising from the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, was spoken of to them as a man like themselves; a fact that might lead them from the Deity of the man Christ Jesus to deifying other creatures, and investing these with Divine attributes, and attributing to them Divine power, and approaching them with prayer and praise, which, though fitting worship in the case of Jesus Christ, would be idolatry addressed to other creatures. And so St. John adds these words to the end of his Epistle, lest the doctrine he had just insisted on should be misused and perverted, as indeed we know from Church history it has been.<sup>2</sup>

## I TENDENCIES TO IDOLATRY

1. Man everywhere has some appreciation of the spiritual. We may describe it as we will, but everywhere man is conscious of it, in some form or fashion. If we take the lowest form of that conception of which we know anything, that which is called "fetish worship," what is the root idea? It is a recognition of the spiritual, it is an expression of fear. A fetish worshipper, if he be unaccompanied by his fetish, will refuse to trade with you, will refuse to have any dealings with you. Why? Because he thinks that the carrying of his particular fetish keeps away evil spirits. His conception of the supernatural is the conception of antagonistic forces, and he endeavours to charm them away. All charms, all necromancy, all attempts to avert some catastrophe by this kind of thing, are of the same nature. They are a recognition of that which is beyond. And it is not only a recognition of the spiritual as beyond the material; it is also a recognition of relationship of some kind. Idolatry is always born out of this recognition, and out of a consciousness of need. The need is an anxiety. It may simply be a need of protection, or it may be a need of communion; but whether this or that, every idol is a demonstration of the Divine origin of man. As St. Augustine said long ago, God has made the human heart so that it can never find rest save in Himself. After that rest humanity everywhere is seeking, and all idolatry is a demonstration of the search.

¶ When the populace of Paris adorned the statue of Strasbourg with immortelles, none, even the simplest of the pious decorators, would suppose that the city of Strasbourg itself, or any spirit or ghost of the city, was actually there, sitting in the Place de la Concorde. The figure was delightful to them as a visible nucleus for their fond thoughts about Strasbourg; but never for a moment supposed to be Strasbourg.

Similarly, they might have taken delight in a statue purporting to represent a river instead of a city,—the Rhine, or Garonne, suppose,—and have been touched with strong emotion in looking at it, if the real river were dear to them, and yet never think for an instant that the statue was the river.

And yet again, similarly, but much more distinctly, they might take delight in the beautiful image of a god, because it gathered and perpetuated their thoughts about that god; and yet never suppose, nor be capable of being deceived by any arguments into supposing, that the statue was the god.

On the other hand, if a meteoric stone fell from the sky in the sight of a savage, and he picked it up hot, he would most probably lay it aside in some, to him, sacred place, and believe the stone itself to be a kind of god, and offer prayer and sacrifice to it.

In like manner, any other strange or terrifying object, such, for instance, as a powerfully noxious animal or plant, he would be apt to regard in the same way; and very possibly also construct for himself frightful idols of some kind, calculated to produce upon him a vague impression of their being alive; whose imaginary anger he might deprecate or avert with sacrifice, although incapable of conceiving in them any one attribute of exalted intellectual or moral nature.<sup>1</sup>

2. Man must have a God, and when he loses the vision of the true God, he makes a God for himself. The making of idols is an attempt to find God, and God is always built up out of the imagination, and according to the pattern of the builder himself. Every idol is the result of a conception of God which is the magnified personal self-consciousness of the man who creates his idol. Or to put it in another form, idolatry is self-projection. First man imagines his God, and the God he imagines is himself enlarged. "Eyes have they, noses have they, hands have they, feet have they." The Psalmist in those words took the physical facts, and showed how man in making a God projects his own personality; and calls that magnified personality God. It is seen at once that the result is magnified failure, intensified evil. So all human conditions which are evil, being active in the thinking of the man who would construct his deity, are to be found intensified in that deity. To go back to the Old Testament, we have Baal, Molech, and all the evil deities. What are they but the evil things of humanity magnified? And so everywhere we find that men have made idols according to their own understanding.

Dear God and Father of us all  
    Forgive our faith in cruel lies,  
    Forgive the blindness that denies,  
Forgive Thy creature, when he takes  
    For the all-perfect love Thou art  
    Some grim creation of his heart.  
Cast down our idols; overturn  
    Our bloody altars: let us see  
    Thyself in Thy humanity.

3. The whole history of the Jews, of which the Bible is the record, is one long warning and protest against idolatry. Abraham became the father of the faithful because he obeyed the call of God to abandon the idols which his fathers had worshipped beyond the Euphrates. Jacob made his family bury under the Terebinth of Shechem their Syrian amulets and Syrian gods. But Israel was constantly starting aside into idolatry like a broken bow. Even in the wilderness they took up the tabernacle of Molech, and the star of their god Remphan, idols which they had made to worship. Even under the burning crags of Sinai, "they made a calf in Horeb, and worshipped the molten image"; and for centuries afterwards the apostate kings of northern Israel doubled that sin in Dan and Bethel.

The seven servitudes of the Book of Judges were the appropriate retribution for seven apostasies. From Solomon to Manasseh, king after king, even of Judah, forsook Jehovah. Then came the crashing blow of the Exile, the utter ruin of every hope of domination or of independence. The agony of being thus torn from their temple and their home and the land they loved cured them forever of material idolatry; but they fell headlong into another and subtler idolatry—the idolatry of forms and ceremonies, the idolatry of the dead letter of their law. Pharisaism was only a new idolatry, and it was, in some respects, more dangerous than the old. It was more dangerous because more self-satisfied, more hopelessly impenitent; more dangerous because, being idolatry, it passed itself off as the perfection of faithful worship. Hence it plunged them into a yet deadlier iniquity. Baal worshippers had murdered the Prophets; Pharisees crucified the Lord of Life.

4. What gives this tendency its strength? The Jews were tempted to worship these idols because they saw in the lives of the nations around them that emancipation from shame, from conscience, from restraint, from the stern and awful laws of morality, for which all bad men sigh. They longed for that slavery of sin which would be freedom from righteousness. It was not the revolting image of Molech that allured them; it was the spirit of hatred, the fierce delight of the natural wild beast which lurks in the human heart. Molech was but the projection into the outward of ghastly fears born of man's own guilt; the consequent impulse to look on God as a wrathful, avenging Being, to be propitiated only by human agony and human blood; and as One whom (so whispered to them a terrified selfishness) it was better to propitiate by passing their children through the fire than to let themselves suffer from His rage. It was not any image of Mammon that allured them to worship that abject spirit. It was the love of money, which is a root of all evil; it was covetousness, which is idolatry. And why should they worship the degraded Baal-Peor? Just because he was degraded; just because of "those wanton rites which cost them woe."

¶ Idolatry, kneeling to a monster. The contrary of Faith—not want of Faith. Idolatry is faith in the wrong thing, and quite distinct from Faith in No thing, the "Dixit Insipiens." Very wise men may be idolaters, but they cannot be atheists. 1

¶ Do these tendencies not reveal themselves still? Is it not possible that we form to ourselves false conceptions of God? We think of Him on the one hand as a self-willed despot, or we think of Him on the other hand as a sentimental father, who has within Him no power of anger or of passion. Again, have we not thought of Him too often as an indifferent proprietor,—forgive the homeliness of the figure of speech,—an absentee landlord, who collects rents on Sundays, and cares nothing about what happens to His property during the week? How often shall we have to plead guilty to this charge, that we have a god to suit our own convenience; that we accommodate the doctrine of God which the Bible contains, and which Jesus uttered finally for the world, to our own low level of life; that we have allowed our selfishness to blur the vision of God, and to make or create a new god according to our own understanding? 2

## II FORMS OF IDOLATRY

1. Idolatry manifests itself at times in gross and material forms.—What was the sin of Jeroboam? That he set up golden images at Dan and Bethel, and in doing so provided for the people a representation of God. When Jeroboam set up those golden images, he had no idea of setting up new gods. That was not the sin of Jeroboam. In the wilderness, when the men, waiting for Moses, according to the ancient story, made a golden calf, they were not making any new god. When we read the story carefully, we discover that they were making a likeness of Jehovah, and when they had made their golden calf and bowed themselves before it, they observed a feast of Jehovah. That was the sin of Jeroboam also; not the setting up of a new deity, not the introduction into the national life of a god borrowed from surrounding countries, but an attempt to help Israel to know Jehovah by a likeness, a representation of Him which should be set up at Dan and Bethel. In so doing, Jeroboam was not breaking the first commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods," but the second, "Thou shalt not make any likeness of God."

We go a little further on in the history of Israel, and we find Ahab. The sin of Ahab was different from Jeroboam's in that he introduced other deities and placed them beside Jehovah. He built temples for Baal and established the worship of Baal. That was not a representation of Jehovah, but another deity. The sin of Ahab was that he broke the first of the words of the Decalogue. The breach of the second word of the Decalogue always precedes the breach of the first in the history of believing peoples. First, something to set up to help us to see and understand God; and then presently other gods usurping the place of God. First, a false conception of God, and we worship it; secondly, some other deity by the side of God.

¶ Dr. Buchanan, who was an eye-witness of the worship of Juggernaut in India, describes what he saw. The Temple of Juggernaut



has been standing for eight or nine hundred years. The idol is like a man, with large diamonds for eyes; with a black face, and a mouth foaming with blood. Well, he says he saw this idol put upon a large carriage, nine or ten times as high as the biggest man one ever saw. And then the men, women and children (tens and hundreds of thousands were there together) began to draw the carriage along. The wheels made deep marks in the ground as it went along. And here there was a man who lay down before it, and the wheels went over him and killed him on the spot. And again there was a woman, who in the same way lay down before the idol, thinking she was sure to get to heaven if she was crushed beneath that idol's carriage wheels. And he saw children there drawing the idol. And he tells about two little children sitting crying beside their dying mother, who had come to the city of the idol, and perished there from fatigue and want. And when they were asked where their home was, they said they had no home but where their mother was. And that mother was dying before her time because of her idolatry. Well might he have told such little ones how foolish and how wrong such conduct was, and said to them, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."<sup>1</sup>

¶ As we were preparing a foundation for the Church, a huge and singular-looking round stone was dug up, at sight of which the Tannese stood aghast. The eldest Chief said,—

"Missi, that stone was either brought there by Karapanamun (the Evil Spirit), or hid there by our great Chief who is dead. That is the Stone God to which our forefathers offered human sacrifices; these holes held the blood of the victim till drunk up by the Spirit. The Spirit of that stone eats up men and women and drinks their blood, as our fathers taught us. We are in greatest fear!"

A Sacred Man claimed possession, and was exceedingly desirous to carry it off; but I managed to keep it, and did everything in my power to show them the absurdity of these foolish notions. Idolatry had not, indeed, yet fallen throughout Tanna, but one cruel idol, at least, had to give way for the erection of God's House on that benighted land.<sup>2</sup>

2. There is also an intellectual idolatry when our own false notions are allowed to usurp the place of truth. The first meaning of the word "idols" is false, shadowy, fleeting images; subjective phantoms; wilful illusions; cherished fallacies. This is the sense in which the word is used by our great English philosopher, Lord Bacon. He speaks of "idols of the tribe," false notions which seem inherent in the nature of man, and which, like an unequal mirror mingling its own nature with that of the light, distort and refract it. There are also "idols of the cave." Every man has in his heart some secret cavern in which an idol lurks, reared there by his temperament or his training, and fed with the incense of his passions, so that a man, not seeking God in His word or works, but only in the microcosm of his own heart, thinks of God not as He is, but as he chooses to imagine Him to be. And there are "idols of the market-place," false conceptions of God which spring from men's intercourse with one another, and from the fatal force of words. And there are "idols of the school," false notions which come from the spirit of sect, and system, and party, and formal theology.

¶ All sin is an untruth, a defiance of the true order of earth and heaven. In one of Hort's great sayings, Every thought which is base or vile or selfish is first of all untrue. These are the idols from which we have to keep ourselves. Whatever you think of God in your inmost heart, you will live accordingly. Whatever idol you make Him into, that idol will make you like itself.<sup>1</sup>

¶ George Herbert says that if you look on the pane of glass in a window, you may either let your eye rest on the glass, or you may look through the glass at the blue heaven beyond it. Now Beauty, Truth, and Goodness are windows through which we may see God. But, on the other hand, just as a man who looks at a window may let his eye rest on the pane of glass, instead of using the glass as a medium through which he can look at the glowing scene beyond, so we may allow our minds to rest on Beauty, or Truth, or Goodness, instead of using these as media through which to contemplate God.<sup>2</sup>

¶ Like all those who find their vent in Art, Jenny Lind seemed always as if her soul was a homeless stranger here amid the thick of earthly affairs, never quite comprehending why the imperfect should exist, never quite able to come down from the lighted above and form her eyes to the twilight of the prison and the cave.<sup>3</sup>

3. But most frequently idolatry assumes a practical shape.—What does St. John mean by an idol? Does he mean that barbarous figure of Diana which stood in the great temple, hideous and monstrous? No! he means anything, or any person, that comes into the heart and takes the place which ought to be filled by God, and by Him only. What I prize most, what I trust most utterly, what I should be most forlorn if I lost, what is the working aim of my heart—that is my idol. In Ephesus it was difficult to have nothing to do with heathenism. In that ancient world their religion, though it was a superficial thing, was intertwined with daily life in a fashion that puts us to shame. Every meal had its libation, and almost every act was knit by some ceremony or other to a god; so that Christian men and women had almost to go out of the world, in order to be free from complicity in the all-pervading idol-worship. Now, although the form has changed, and the fascinations of old idolatry belong only to a certain stage in the world's culture and history, the temptation to idolatry remains just as subtle, just as all-pervasive, and the yielding to it just as absurd.

¶ Just consider what your feelings would be, were a heathen king to conquer this land, and to set up the images of his gods in the beautiful cathedral at Salisbury, where so many generations have been accustomed to worship God and His Son. Yet the heart of a Christian is far more beautiful, and far more precious, and far dearer to God, than that cathedral. The cathedral at Salisbury will not last for ever; Christ did not die for it, He did not purchase it with His own blood. But us He has bought; for us He has paid a price, that we might be His for all eternity. What, then, must be His feelings, to see His own hearts defiled and polluted by being given up

to idols?1

Hear, Father! hear and aid!  
If I have loved too well, if I have shed,  
In my vain fondness, o'er a mortal head  
Gifts, on Thy shrine, my God, more fitly laid,  
If I have sought to live  
But in one light, and made a mortal eye  
The lonely star of my idolatry,  
Thou that art Love, oh! pity and forgive!2

¶ Many people spend their life as some African tribes do,—constructing idols, finding they are not the oracles they fancied, and breaking them in pieces to seek others. They have an uninteresting succession of perfect friends and infallible teachers. How many need the angel's word, "See thou do it not."3

¶ I went out into the garden to walk before dinner, and with difficulty refrained my tears to think how oft and with what sweet delight I had borne my dear, dear boy along that walk, with my dear wife at my side; but had faith given me to see his immortality in another world, and rest satisfied with my Maker's will. Sir Peter Lawrie called after dinner, and besought me, as indeed have many, to go and live with him; but nothing shall tempt me from this sweet solitude of retirement, and activity of consolation, and ministry to the afflicted.... When he was gone I went forth upon my outdoor ministry, and as I walked to Mr. Whyte's, along the terraces overlooking those fields where we used to walk, three in one, I was sore, sore distressed, and found the temptation to "idolatry of the memory"; which the Lord delivered me from—at the same time giving the clue to the subject which has been taking form in my mind lately, to be treated as arising out of my trial; and the form in which it presented itself is "the idolatry of the affections," which will embrace the whole evil, the whole remedy, and the sound condition of all relations.1

4. But we must not imagine that God calls upon us to hide every sign of affection.—It is true that Jesus said "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me"; but He also denounced those Pharisees who refused to help their parents under the pretence that they gave so liberally to the Temple treasury.

¶ William Black, in his story *In Far Lochaber*, describes a household "where every natural instinct was repressed as being in itself something lawless; where the father held that he could not love God truly if he showed any demonstrative affection for his children." In his own early home in Glasgow, Black had been brought up in that way. There was genuine family affection but no outward token of it. He revolted from that afterwards, very naturally, and the training of his own three children was very different. But that was the old Scottish idea, having its root in religion—"Keep yourselves from idols." Mothers, losing a child, have sometimes said, "I made too much of an idol of my child, and God has punished me by taking it away." No, no. Do not hide, do not limit natural affection in the name of religion. You make an idol of your child if you would do anything dishonourable for the child's sake; if you say, as it were, my love for the child justifies me; or if you spoil the child by over-indulgence, or by want of rebuke when it does wrong. But do not in the name of religion hide or diminish the tokens of affection. There cannot be too much of that in the home life.

I took the poker, a few minutes before writing this, to break a piece of coal on the fire, and got a painful shock. I struck again, and struck harder, without feeling anything. I had struck the second time in the right place, about a third from the end of the poker. And human love may be more manifested, instead of less, when the love of God is at the root of it. The tokens of the earthly love will not then by any means injure or impair the heavenly.

I could not love thee, dear, so much  
Loved I not honour more.1

¶ We cannot know or enjoy or love the world too much, if God's will controls us. Has a mother anything but joy in watching the little daughter's devotion to her doll? Not until the child is so absorbed that she cannot hear her mother's voice. Did anyone ever love the world more than Jesus did? Yet was anyone ever so loyal to the Father's will? Worldliness is not love of the world but slavishness to it.2

### III DEFENCE AGAINST IDOLATRY

How are we to guard ourselves against idols? What is the defence?

1. We must cherish the vision of the true God and eternal life.—We have that vision in Christ. If I would know God, I must see Him in Christ. And if the God I am worshipping is any other than the Christ who came to reveal Him then the God I am worshipping is not the true God, and I have become an idolater. We cannot see God, cannot apprehend God, save as by the revelation that He has made of Himself. In that holy and infinite mystery of incarnation there is an adaptation of God Himself to man's own method of finding God.

2. Another defence will be found in our love of truth.—It is not by learning or by culture or even by worship that we come to the knowledge of God. The utmost that even worship can do is to cleanse us for our higher duties—those duties of common life in which our God reveals Himself, in joy and sorrow, in sickness and in health alike. Even the Supper of the Lord would be a mockery, if Christ were not as near us in every other work of truth we do. Only let us be true, true in every fibre of our being, and truth of thought shall cleanse our eyes to see the truth of God which is the light of life.

¶ The easiest lesson in the school of truth is to do our work in the spirit of truth. Petty as it may seem, it is the earthward end of a ladder that reaches up to heaven. It is a greater work to give the cup of cold water than raise the dead. Our single duty here on earth is to bend all our heart and all our soul and all our mind to the single task of learning the love of truth, for the love of truth is the love of God.<sup>1</sup>

3. But it is not only our own effort that is needed; for just a sentence or two before, the Apostle had said: “He that is born of God”—that is, Christ—“keepeth us.” So our keeping of ourselves is essentially our letting Him keep us. Stay inside the walls of the citadel, and you need not be afraid of the besiegers; go outside by letting your faith flag, and you will be captured or killed. Keep yourselves by clinging to “him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless.” Seek fellowship with Him who is the only true God, and is able to satisfy your whole nature, mind, heart, will; and these false deities will have no power to tempt you to bow the knee.

“The Lord thy Keeper,” then: ’tis writ for thee,  
By night and day, wayworn and feeble sheep!  
Without, within, He shall thy Guardian be;  
And e’en to endless ages He shall keep  
Thy wandering heart.

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