

## Created to Worship . . . Prone to Wander

### Without a Doubt, Conclusion

*1 John 5:21*

In an article for The Wall Street Journal, writer Leonard Mlodinow shares the humorous story from the life of baseball great Joe DiMaggio in the mid-1940's.

It was the summer of 1945, and World War II had ended; former soldiers streamed back into America and the American life. One of the recently returned soldiers was Yankee slugger Joe DiMaggio. He slipped into the ball field stadium with his four-year-old son, Joe, hoping to watch a game as just an average citizen before rejoining his team.

A fan noticed him, then another. Soon throughout the stadium people were chanting, "Joe, Joe, Joe DiMaggio!" DiMaggio was moved by this tribute and he looked down to see if his son had noticed. He had. In fact, he looked up at his father smiling ear to ear and said, "See, Daddy, everybody knows me!"

Little Joe DiMaggio, Jr. made the innocent the rather innocent mistake of assuming all the glory at the Yankee Stadium that summer afternoon belonged to him and not to his father.

But isn't this the greatest failure of the human race? Do we not make a far less innocent mistake when we live as if our lives were all about us and our glory, rather than about our Heavenly Father and his glory?<sup>i</sup>

Frankly, it is nothing less than idolatry when we take ourselves off the altar as living sacrifices and demand the throne of our Sovereign Lord.

Try asking the average person – even the average Christian – if they struggle with idolatry and they'll think you just fell off the turnip truck and hit your head.

Which is one of the reasons the last 6 words of John the Apostle are either ignored or relegated to some stone-age issue a long time ago.

Turn to that last phrase in ***First John chapter 5***. Let's back up and get a running start with ***verse 20***. ***And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God – remember from our last study – this is the real and authentic God and eternal life.***

Now ***verse 21***; ***Little children, guard yourselves from idols.***

By the way, John ends this letter with the same tough and tender approach he began with.

In ***chapter 2 and verse 1*** he referred to us as ***little children*** – it's an affectionate term revealing that John is writing from the vantage point of loving parental concern.

Even though he's given it to us squarely between the eyes throughout this letter – boldly at times and without apology – yet behind his words there has been this context of pastoral care and parental love.

In fact, his terms for us have been nothing less than precious titles;

- Six times throughout the Epistle he has called us “beloved” – an affectionate term of love (2:7, 3:2, 3:21, 4:1, 4:7, 4:11).
- Three times John has reminded us all of our family connection to each other by calling us brethren (3:13, 14, 16) – we are in the same family
- But 9 times throughout this letter John refers to his readers as his children (τεκνία) (2:1, 12, 13, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21)

John pretty much began his letter by referring to us as his little children and now he wraps up the letter with that same term.

Why? Because it's the perfect term to communicate not only his love for us but his great concern for us in view of the dangers confronting us.<sup>ii</sup>

He's effectively talking to us like a concerned parent who worries about our safety.

And just like a concerned parent, John's last words are one last warning.

***Little children, he writes, guard yourselves from idols.***

This verb “to guard yourselves” is an imperative in the Greek language. In other words, you could write into your Bibles an exclamation point at the end of **verse 21**. First John effectively ends with an exclamation point.

And it's like John is saying, “Little children, guard yourselves from idols . . . and I mean it . . . do it!

The word here for **guard** refers to standing like an armed guard ready for any and every attack.<sup>iii</sup>

This is the only time the verb appears in First John.

It's obvious that in John's mind the attacks are going to take place so he warns us to be ready.

This verb has urgency to it. Watch out . . . we would say, “Be careful, it's a jungle out there.”

Much like you end a phone conversation with a child or maybe even your parents – no matter how old that family member is – as they get on the road to drive somewhere at night . . . you end your conversation by saying, “Be careful . . . and watch out for deer” right?”

It's the only way deer are allowed to be killed around here – and evidently a lot of them take advantage of that because they like to play chicken right by the road.

The truth is the Christian is more likely to come across the path of a lion than they are a deer.

The Apostle Peter tells the believer, “***Be alert – watch out – for your enemy the Devil prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*** – literally, to discredit . . . to ruin . . . to create a collision and rejoice over the casualties. (***1 Peter 5:8***)

***Little children*** . . . I love you and I'm warning all of you . . . ***stand like an armed guard on the lookout for idols.***

You might cross paths with them – and it might be in broad daylight.

Now what exactly is John referring to in light of this word, **idols**?

I read the dissertation of one scholar who uncovered and dealt with more than 9 different possibilities:

- These idols were pagan images/statues of deities
- They were a reference to the food offered to idols
- They represented compromise with pagan lifestyles
- Idols were mystery religions and their practices
- They were gnostic ideologies

- They represented a return to worship in the Jerusalem Temple
- Idols were any kind of sin
- They were a figurative expression for anything taking the place of God
- They represented a rejection of the gospel<sup>iv</sup>

As I skimmed his 200 page treatise, it seemed clear to me that the Apostle John may very well have had several of these in mind – perhaps all of them.

Certainly there would have been a temptation to return to the flamboyant, sensual worship at the Temple of Aphrodite for the Corinthian believers. To re-enter that world of sin.

Corinth was so sexually saturated that the very name of their city had become the Grecian nickname for immorality. A loose woman was called a Corinthian girl.<sup>v</sup>

Surely the New Testament Christians were mocked for their simple and crude memorial to the Carpenter they called their Lord Messiah; I mean, can you imagine the stark contrast of Christianity in the city of Ephesus to the great temple of Diana?

That temple stood with rows of columns stretching 60 feet into the air; adorned with sculptures of the pantheon at the top. All around the temple were magnificently beautiful gardens and inside was this massive idol standing on black marble where she had stood for 200 years.<sup>vi</sup>

Her religion institutionalized sexual orgies, drunkenness and drug induced rituals of worship.

The Temple of Diana was the worship of the here and now.

And her priests would stand near the temple – covered with their tattoos, selling little replicas of the temple and their idol.<sup>vii</sup>

They had done so for centuries.

And now – imagine it – uneducated fisherman and former Jewish zealots were now announcing that their gospel was actually based on the incarnation of the Son of the only true and living God.

Yes, the Romans crucified Him and buried him, but He’s alive now and ascended to His father. You

can’t see Him now, but His kingdom has no rival – the gardens of His heavenly city are beyond description – the very streets of His capital city are made of gold.

But you have to wait.

Would idolatry so intimidate and lure early believers that some would slip away and back to the impressive – the powerful – the sensual – the majority opinion – the religion that focused on what you see, taste and touch – here and now.

The word John uses here in this text for *idols* is a fascinating word that can be translated “shadows”.<sup>viii</sup>

It’s a word that can be translated, reflections – such as a reflection in the water or in a mirror.<sup>ix</sup>

Plato used the word to refer to “the pleasures of life are illusionary [idols] of real pleasure . . . implanted in the breasts of fools is this blindness for phantom/idols of [pleasure].<sup>x</sup>

In other words, idols are mere reflections – but in reality are more like a mirage than the real item.

Which has a kernel of New Testament truth to it, doesn’t it?

People worship pleasure and money and power and fashion and fame, but when they get their hands on some item, some thing, some person, some accomplishment, some title, some money, some new toy, they discover it was a mirage . . . it didn’t give them pleasure after all and they’re still unsatisfied.

The mirage couldn’t quench their thirst.

The truth is – and I agree with one author who writes – the danger of idolatry is bound up in the fact that we were created to worship; we *must* worship – we will worship. Even as nature abhors a vacuum, so does the human soul. The human soul will find an object of worship, either on the shelf, on the altar or in the mirror.<sup>xi</sup>

Is idolatry a thing of the past? Is idolatry dead?

Far from it.

Martin Luther, the converted Catholic monk wrote in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “An idol is that upon which one relies; a god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge; that to which

your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.<sup>xii</sup>

J. I. Packer wrote, your god is whatever you seek, serve, love and allow to control you.<sup>xiii</sup>

That's the real god upon the throne of your heart.

The Apostle Paul called covetousness *idolatry* and he challenged the believer to resist it.

Covetousness, which is idolatry, is whatever it is you crave is truly that which has first place in your life.

He writes to the Corinthians, "Therefore my beloved, fell from idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:14); further to the Colossians he writes, "Impurity, passion, evil desire and greed, amount to idolatry. (Colossians 3:5)

There are plenty of idols – alive and well. They may not have ornate temples, tall columns and tattooed priests – but these gods are still pursued by billions world-wide, ever ready to sit upon the throne of your heart.

Packer called them the gods of pleasure, possessions and position; tongue in cheek he became even more convicting when he referred to the gods of football, the family and the firm; he also categorized the gods of the stomach, the gods of shekels and the gods of sex.

He wrote, the list of gods is endless, for anything that anyone allows to run his life has become his god.<sup>xiv</sup>

Has it occurred to you how quickly things can become comforts and then move into the category of necessities and eventually become God-given rights and if He loved me I'd have them?

A 2012 article from The Atlantic made the observation that over the past 100 years we have turned yesterday's luxuries into today's necessities.

- In 1900, less than 10% of the population in our country owned a stove;
- In 1915, less than 10% of the population owned a car;
- In 1930, less than 10% of the population owned a refrigerator or washing machine;

- In 1945, less than 10% of the population owned an air-conditioner;
- In 1960, less than 10% of the population owned a dishwasher or color TV;
- In 1975, less than 10% of the population owned a microwave;
- In 1990, less than 10% of the population owned a cell phone<sup>xv</sup>

Can you imagine the horror . . . how did people survive without an air conditioner, color TV, microwave and cell phone?!

Let me show you some pictures that are worth a thousand words;

- This is the phone kids have today when they are 6 years old;

The phone kids have today when they are six.



- This is the phone my kids had when they were 6;

The phone my kids had when they were six.



- This is the phone I had when I was 6.



That says it all, doesn't it?

In my study, I came across Sir Francis Bacon's four classes of idols which, he wrote, beset men's minds. He writes, I have called the first class, Idols of the Tribe; the second class, Idols of the Cave; the third class, Idols of the Market-Place and the fourth class, Idols of the Theatre.

He went on to explain that idols of the tribe where nationalistic goals were most important; he called idols of the cave those spiritual superstitions and speculations; he explained that the idols of the market place were business priorities, promotion, money and power; finally, his idols of the theatre were in reference to entertainment which had become the chief pursuit of many.<sup>xvi</sup>

Michael Horton, who quoted from Sir Francis Bacon went on to level an accusation at the typical evangelical church where nationalism seems to be the most urgent topic; where superstitious beliefs hold sway over Bible exposition; where the marketing tools of business models attempt to induce people to attend and then when they attend, entertainment models have replaced worshipping the true and living God so that [unbelievers will feel comfortable and more at home].<sup>xvii</sup>

By the way, there is another form of idolatry which John may have very well included in this final warning.

Since he wanted to so clearly establish the deity of Christ and the equality of the Father and the Son – the attributes of authentic deity.

Any person or church who denies the attributes of God has created another God . . . an idol.

Which is exactly what the mainline protestant church of today has effectively accomplished – it has made a false idol of God by choosing to worship the God they've created with the attribute they've wanted.

He is the God of love, but not of justice; He is the God of grace but not of wrath; He is the creator of Heaven, but not Hell.<sup>xviii</sup>

This form of idolatry is easily spotted in a person who says to you, "Look, I hear what you're saying about God, you know, in the Bible, but when I think about God, I like to think about Him as . . ." – you fill in the blank.

They do nothing more than fulfill the words of Rousseau who once wrote, "God created man in His own image, and man returned the favor."

Lets' create a religion and a god that wants to get along with us no matter who we are and what we do.

At a conference not too long ago, sponsored by the World Council of Churches – mainline protestant churches – the issue of Christian soteriology – salvation – was hotly debated by delegates in attendance. It was attacked as promoting violence. A Father (God) killing His Son (Jesus) was a formula for child abuse. One delegate said, "We don't need a theory of atonement at all – I don't think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood – we just need to listen to the god within."<sup>xix</sup>

Imagine, mainline Protestant churches today, by denying the revelation of God's word are in reality promoting nothing less than idolatry – right inside their own sanctuary – they think they're worshipping God, but in reality they are worshipping an idol they've created – a God whose attributes and doctrines have been scrubbed and polished to make Him more palatable and acceptable and politically correct.

So God is the spark within; God is earth; God is universal force; God is she or he; God is mother, father, child; God is evolving and learning; and most of all, God has not determined a future judgment.

That's the kind of god we'll bow to!

In one survey I read recently, nearly half of the students at evangelical colleges and seminaries now believe that talking about divine judgment is actually bad manners . . . uncultured . . . in bad taste.<sup>xx</sup>

Was Jesus Christ demonstrating bad manners when He said to his audience who refused to repent, ***“Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you (Matthew 11:24).***

Was the Apostle Paul in bad taste when he preached to the upper echelon of Athens about Christ, the unknown God, and at the end of his message told them, ***“God . . . has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness.” (Acts 17:31)***

In other words, you're in trouble with the real, living Creator God.

Listen, it isn't bad manners to tell somebody who pulls up beside you at the stoplight that their car engine is on fire and they'd better jump out; as long as it's true.

It isn't bad taste or uncultured to tell somebody smoke is coming out of their second floor bedroom window.

It isn't bad taste to tell someone the truth about God either. And I think this is a part of John's warning. Don't get tripped up by idols created by false teachers who are creating lesser gods.

To take away attributes from God is to subtract from God and whatever god you end up with at the end of your clever subtraction process isn't really the God of the Bible.

**And here's a further danger to avoid.**

You and I – and everybody else in the world – are actually in the process of being conformed into the image of the God we worship.

***Psalm 115:8*** delivers the profound principles that idolaters become like the gods they create – it says,

***those who make them – these idols – will become like them, everyone who trusts in them.***

In other words, you become as shallow or as deep as the idol you passionately pursue.

- You pursue sexual experiences outside God's prescribed norms and you will end up sexually dissatisfied and empty;
- You pursue money and you will end up embittered by those who have more than you.
- You pursue fame and approval and you will end up egotistically consumed by your own achievements and the utter despair at having accomplished so little and at receiving so little acclaim.
- You pursue the shallow, temporary idols of beauty and strength and as you age you will die a thousand times in frustration and fear before they finally bury you.

Warren Wiersbe put it this way, “An idol represents that which is false and empty; and a person who lives for idols will himself become false and empty.”<sup>xxi</sup>

Little children – be careful – stand guard against idols.

Simply put, for the believer – and John is writing believers here – anything that comes between a Christian and Jesus Christ – be it an ambition, a desire, a pleasure, a relationship, a habit, a plan – if it denies the attributes and the sovereignty of Christ over your life; if it leads you to disobey the word of God; yet you will pursue it – you must have it – you will embrace it – you have at that point become an idolater.

Listen, since John is warning believers that idolatry is possible for Christians. It's possible for Christians to chase a mirage – to covet and pursue and live for something that violates the living word – Jesus Christ – and the written word – the Bible.

***Be careful little children of idols.***

Robert Robinson had a rough beginning. His father died when he was young; his mother, unable to control him, sent him to London to learn how to

be a barber. What he learned instead was hard drinking and a gang-life. When he was 17 he and some of his buddies went to see a fortune teller and they mocked her as she attempted to tell their future. But something about that encounter bothered Robert and that same evening he decided to go hear a man preach by the name of George Whitefield. Not long after that message Robert gave his life to Christ. A few years later he entered the ministry, full of desire and passion for the gospel. He even wrote a hymn for his congregation to learn as they celebrated a special Sunday service. His hymn reads at one stanza:

*Oh, to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let thy grace, Lord, like a fetter,  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.  
Prone to wander, Lord I feel it;  
Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it,  
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

One day years later Robinson was riding a stagecoach when he noticed a woman deeply engrossed with a hymnal. She was humming one of the hymns. She turned to Robinson and asked what he thought of the hymn to which he responded, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man who wrote that hymn many years ago; and I would give a thousand worlds, to enjoy that sentiment once again."<sup>xxii</sup>

Beloved, our hearts so easily, continually manufacture idols; priorities that pull us away from the feet of Jesus and the glory of our great and eternal Lord.

Sam Gordon writes,

- anything that squeezes God out of number one position in your life is an idol;
- anything that relegates Him to a lower rung on the ladder is an idol;
- anything that moves Him to the fringes of your life is an idol.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Little children . . . watch out . . . be careful . . . stay alert . . . every day you are on a collision course with an idol.

I like the Amplified Bible's rendering of First John 5:21 which expands the idea correctly conveyed in these verbs and their tenses – *Little children, keep yourselves from anything and everything that would occupy the place in your heart due to God; from any form or substitute for [Jesus Christ] that would take first place in your life.*

Jesus Christ is the only God both worthy of worshipping and worth becoming more like. Anything else is a shallow, temporary substitute.

Jesus is the real, true and living God. And it is here at the feet of Jesus Christ which John leaves us.

One evening the great conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It was absolutely breathtaking and brilliant – and at the end of the performance – at the final crescendo, the crowd went wild with their standing ovation.

They clapped and whistled and shouted – they were absolutely caught up in the greatness of that performance. As Toscanini stood there, he bowed and bowed and bowed again; he acknowledged his orchestra as they also stood and bowed.

When the ovation finally subsided, Toscanini turned and looked intently at his musicians and then whispered rather fiercely; Ladies and Gentlemen, I am nothing! He added, "And you are nothing." But Beethoven" – he said with absolute passion – is everything, everything, everything!<sup>xxiv</sup>

John comes to the end of this letter and ends at just this point;

- our world is nothing . . . it's a mere shadow of that which truly matters;
- and we are nothing – apart from the grace of this One who saved us —
- oh, but Jesus Christ is everything, everything . . . everything!

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