

The Idolatry of the Heart Acts 7:35-43

We are in this great sermon of Stephen that will ultimately lead to him being taken outside the city and stoned by an angry mob, who are led by the Sanhedrin or the leaders of Israel. It is they who are running this trial against Stephen who is indicted against speaking against the Temple and the Law of God. And what Stephen is showing is nothing really has changed in Israel. As their the fathers in the past rejected the revelation of God and rebelled against him so they are now. And the message to the religious leaders is don't make the same mistake. Don't be blinded by your own foolish heart not to recognize Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Just like in the ancient days, where God performed stunning signs and wonders against the deities of Egypt and even gave the people living oracles, the people rejected him. And last week we saw that the problem is not that there was not enough revelation or evidence of God, but the problem is the human heart. Look at **verse 39, "Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt."** They thrust aside Moses, and in actual fact, thrust aside God and all that he had shown about himself to them. And it is shocking and stunning. And the problem is not external. The problem is so much deeper. It is the human heart. It is the totality of our fallen thoughts and longings in us. Even as the people of God, we know so often the right thing to do, but because of our human hearts we want what we want. It is not because of lack of information that we lust or think of ourselves before others or do not forgive or choose anger over patience. We will try to blame something external, but our hearts crave and we have fed that craving until it gives forth to an external fruit. We cannot blame God or anyone else.

And we come to the most basic problem for all of humanity, and that is faulty worship. When I see someone yawn at the Scriptures or God himself, the problem is not the preaching or God's Word — it is just not exciting enough. No the problem is false worship. You will find that person is excited about something. Something thrills his or her soul. Whether they realize it or not, they are worshiping something or someone. If you are apathetic toward God then you are excited about something else. There is something that you want to hang onto or something that you want to obtain above God and everything else. All humans are worshipers. And the most condemned sin in all of the Scriptures is idolatry. And idolatry is that I have given my heart over to something other than God. John Calvin said that the human heart is an idol factory. And he couldn't have been more right. It is constantly producing idols, gods in our inner person - to adore, run after, and desire. The two big idols in our world are money and sex. The love of money effects us more than we like to admit. It is easy to find your identity and status in the things you have. We might have all experienced that rush of buying something new. People are more excited about money than God. And the other is sex. Our world and society is sex mad. And every week it seems that some pastor or leader in the church falls, cheats on his spouse, but they really fell so long before. Their heart was captured by that passion.

So I want us to understand the question we are going to investigate this morning. And it is not this: are you worshiping? If you have a pulse this morning then you are worshiping, living for something. You are invested in something. And the host

of things, people and desires that can control your heart are simply endless. The question is not are you worshipping, but what are you worshipping? Remember, as we will see this morning, the problem is not lack of knowledge or anything else. It is high handed unwillingness to submit to the only God and Saviour who can satisfy and that is Jesus Christ. He is Lord and He is Saviour, and he is where life and abundant life can be found. And we realize the implications for those outside of Christ, but often as believers we can go astray. There are many hills and valleys that we go through. And the idols of the heart want to dupe us that we can control them, and that life can be found in them. "If I can only have this or that?" What is your heart seeking this morning? Have you done an internal inventory? Because your idolatry will expose itself. Our prayer should be as believers Psalm 19:12-14, **"Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer."** There is only one who can expose those hidden faults and show us our hearts, and show us our glorious rock and redeemer. I want us to see a couple things this morning. One is idols are an invention of people, and idols ultimately cannot satisfy.

1. Idols are the invention of the human heart. **Vv. 39-41**

Some one has once said that God made man in his own image, and man has tried to return the favour by making God in man's image. And it is certainly true. Fallen man is trying to control God by fashioning him as he sees fit. And it is astonishing how many individuals say they believe there is a God, but never investigate who he is, but are content with their own thoughts and construction of God. The most important question is: who is God? If I have to face him one day — who is he? And the answer so often is "this is what I think." And that indicates nothing. It indicates what kind of God you have constructed or made but not who God is. And let me ask you: have you sought to know God? If God is going to be known then he has to reveal himself and he has. In this book. Have you ever investigated the Scriptures to see who God is. The religious leaders have long since thrown off the Scriptures and followed their traditions, and they didn't even recognize the Messiah when he came. And then were defiant in their rejection.

But we as the people of God are not off the hook. We can try to mold God after our own liking. You can show someone the truth of Scripture, and they can say right after ward "but." We often cross a line but make excuses. It's all right to purchase these things, or it is alright to have emotional relationships with the opposite sex even though this is not my wife. And they are not arguing from the Scripture but just their own reasoning. There is subtlety. Our hearts are not drawn away from God, idols are not constructed in a flash but through one small argument to another in our inner person. And whether they realize it or not, they are molding God after their own likeness. They are forming an idol in their hearts. Obeying and following and finding their joy in Christ has become secondary, they argue that we have not left him but

something they desire more, and an idol promises some sort of joy or freedom but it is only momentary and ends in destruction. The idolatry of the human heart is endless.

And you see it here in our text. And we are shocked by the text in a way because Moses is delayed from coming down the mountain, and right away they turn to Aaron to fashion for themselves idols like they had in Egypt. It is stunning how quickly the heart moves from God to its own desires. And the key here is that this idolatry becomes seen. God's delaying Moses was meant to reveal the idolatry that already existed. So we looked at verse 39 and the heart last time. But look at **verse 40, "saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.'"** It is almost as if when Moses is out of sight, God somehow has disappeared and is not with them. The ever present God has somehow deserted them or left the room so they have to take action. If God will not move in the time frame we want, if he will not do what we want then we will worship another God. And again, think of the plagues of Egypt, think of the dividing of the Red Sea and the decimation of the Egyptian army. Think how God led them to Sinai by a pillar of smoke during the day and a pillar of fire by night. There was no lack of revelation. How God had manifested himself to the people was not the problem. These circumstances were not the problem.

And it is the same with the coming of Jesus for the Sanhedrin. Think of the message again. You are repeating the past rebellion. Jesus came with signs and wonders - irrefutable! They put him to death and he rose from the grave - irrefutable! Then the disciples preach Christ, they do the signs and wonders - irrefutable! And yet here is Stephen on trial for his very life. God has given us his perfect Word that witnesses to his glory and the irrefutability of these things and who Jesus is. We want to blame the circumstances. If only Moses was not delayed. We want to blame the something external. If only I had different children I would not be mad all the time. If only I had more money I would not be trying to escape on the internet from life and trials. If only I had a different spouse I would not be so depressed and thinking how to end this relationship or daydreaming about being with someone else. And if that is going on in your heart then you are taking steps in that direction whether you realize it or not. Idols manifest themselves. The heart manifests itself.

But look at **verse 41, "And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands."** Notice the culpability here is they made a calf with their hands. What was in the heart manifested itself. They now had the opportunity and they ran with it corporately. Idolatry is the oldest sin in human history. They wanted to be God and therefore they wanted to fashion their God so that they could ultimately control him. Look at the end of the verse, because it should scare us when we consider the idolatry of our hearts. They are no longer glorying in God's great deliverance but there is a great exchange that has taken place. It says, they **"were rejoicing in the works of their hands."** They had some sort of momentary satisfaction in their idol. They wanted this and ran after this and now they had it. They could decide what is right and wrong. They could fulfill the desires of their heart. There is a great exchange that took place. Listen to how Paul describes it in **Romans 1:22-23, "Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and**

birds and animals and creeping things.” Can you imagine exchanging God for something or even someone in creation, yet people do it all the time.

And here it is: we all have an inner conscience. We all have that inner lawyer that will argue our case of why God or life is not fair, and how we deserve and how it is right to have what we want. The heart is deceptive, and it does not matter how mature we are in the Lord we can all be duped and led astray. But listen to that statement again, **“claiming to be wise, they became fools.”** People who reject Christ do so by claiming to be wise. Do you know some fools who are wise in their own estimation? We have life and we know who God is and what he permits. And again, the message here is not look at the terrible people in Exodus but to realize the same heart of deception and wickedness in them is in us. Where are you arguing against the Scriptures? What are you desiring that you know is wrong in God’s sight? Don’t be a fool. Don’t worship the creation. Seek Christ. He is the only One that can truly satisfy. He truly is the only Saviour.

2. We cannot find satisfaction in idolatry. **Vv. 39-41.**

We as the people of God have a love-hate relationship with sin. We realize that we are commanded not to love the things of this world. We realize that if we love the things of this world more than we love God then we are not believers in Christ. Listen to **1 John 2:15, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”** And again, he goes on and shows that things are not the problem, but the lusts of our eyes and flesh and mind. It is our hearts. We hate sin. We hate all the things that are broken in this world, all the evil in this world. And we hate sin because it is against our Redeemer and Creator. God at salvation gives us a new desire and life so much so that he and his will becomes attractive.

But the same time we have the remnants of the old life that hang on. And this is where sin becomes attractive. I can remember hearing a man describe his extramarital affair, and he knew the damage it would do to his testimony in Christ, he knew the damage to his marriage and the deep pain it would cause to his children. And we ask: why would anyone ever do that realizing the destructive consequences? And the reason why is because sin and idolatry always promise something. They promise some sort of joy and meaning and satisfaction, or they would have no power. Taking vitamins or eating vegetables may not be tempting for you. Why? Because although they are good for your body they do not promise any immediate gratification. Idolatry does. And there might be that immediate gratification and pleasure that comes from sin, but here is the thing — it can never last and can never satisfy. That is why someone addicted to pornography always has to go back. It is never one and done.

Our problem is that we fool around with our idolatry in our minds and hearts so much that we convince ourselves that life is here, and the pull becomes stronger and stronger. Subtly, and little by little the inner person is drawn away from God and worship to him, to something else — something else that has captured the hearts. We call that worship. We call that idolatry. And you can see that in this passage because remember, there is a delay in Moses coming down from the mountain. The mountain is still filled with smoke and they no doubt still hear the thunder. God is still present. And idolatry doesn’t happen in a flash but little by little the heart is moved away from God,

until idolatry is full blown. And again, look at the phrase right at the end of verse 41 again, **“and were rejoicing in the works of their hands.”** Do you really think that they do not think there is a day of accountability? Do you really think that they cannot see the absolute futility of what they are doing? But they are still rejoicing. Why? Because this idol gives the desires of the heart. If there was not any promise of joy or pleasure then they would have never constructed the golden calf. And think of it, because it must have looked beautiful. It was not just wood but gold. It would have been stunning to look at as the sun shone down on it. They must have been so delighted in their new god which was not God. There is pleasure here.

Now there is a couple of points I want to make before we conclude. One is that there really is a place for everything God has given us. We can have relationships and things to enjoy all under the headship and sovereignty of God. It is when these things exert a pull and thrust on our hearts that they raise themselves above God. And here is the amazing thing: we have a tendency to make the very gifts and graces God has given us to make idols. Isn't it true? We look at things like marriage or sex or money or food or friends. Those things are all good. They are given by God. They are gifts. And if he has not given us certain things, he has given us other good gifts. But we take what God has given us and we make it an idol. Think about the text here. The Hebrews are poor people. They have been in slavery for four hundred years. So here is the question: where did the gold come from to make the idol? Listen to **Exodus 12:35-36, “The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.”** This is incredible. They didn't steal from the Egyptians when they started the Exodus out of Egypt but asked the Egyptians, and the text says they plundered them. They gave so much to these individuals that were the cause of the downfall of the nation under the hand of God. Here is the gift of God. This is from the hand of God, and they take what God had given to them and they form an idol.

Here is the point: don't play the fool. Don't take the good gifts that God has given. Don't worship them, or don't say they are not enough. These things are given that we might know the generous giving nature of our God, not that we would worship them. Use all that we have to worship and adore him.

The second point I want to make is that the things in creation can never satisfy as a replacement for God. Only in his presence is fullness of joy. Only he can satisfy our hearts. Idols promise so much but deliver so little. We always think it is different with us, but in the end your idols will leave you empty. Listen to **Jeremiah 10:3-5, “for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move. Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good.”** What is the whole point here? And it should be easy to see when we look at someone else's idolatry. It cannot give you the life and joy and security you so desire. Your idol will fail because it is impotent. It is powerless. Just like

the ancient idols of old where the craftsmen constructed an image and then bowed before it, it was lifeless to give what they desired.

And here is the point that we forget so often. Here is where our foolish hearts are prone to wander, oh Lord I feel it! They are duped into thinking that if I just had a different relationship or enough sex or enough money or whatever then I could be satisfied. We were meant to seek satisfaction. Our problem is we are seeking it in created things rather than our Creator. For the Sanhedrin it was authority and reputation and riches. Only Jesus came to give life more abundant and free. The challenge for us is where are we seeking life? Where are we wandering and where are we prone to believe a lie. We started this morning by quoting a prayer, and listen to part of it again, **“Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!”** What is having dominion or lordship over you? Here is the glory of our Lord. If you are truly his, he is calling you back to him. He will not let you depart. And his message is very simple. Don't be wise in your own estimation. Don't play the fool. Come where true satisfaction is. Come to me. Whether we are believer or unbeliever the message is the same. Life is found in Christ. Come to him.