

## Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

(studies in Jeremiah)

### **Who Art in Heaven?**

(Jeremiah 7-10)

Study #4

#### **Introduction: The real thing...**

These days, we are inundated by imitations and fakes.

We can find fake Dr. Pepper (Mr. Pibb), fake flowers, fake fur, fake wood-look plastics, fake Christmas trees, fake Beatles (“Rain: a Tribute to the Beatles” is playing at the Majestic), fake synthetic down (for your sleeping bag), cubic zirconia fake diamond jewelry and even fake food (as in “not having actual nutritional value” - i.e. - junk/fast food).<sup>1</sup>

Now some imitations of the real thing offer benefits. And I’m not such a purist that I think we should do away with all imitations. The imitation is sometimes about as good and way less expensive!<sup>2</sup>

But after a while, too much of the fake leaves us hungry for the real thing. We want to go out and buy a real Christmas tree and pick some actual flowers and eat fruits and veggies.

Throughout history, lots and lots of people have substituted “fakes” for the one, true, living God, leaving them hungry for what only He can provide.

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<sup>1</sup> Fake food — I mean those patented substances chemically flavored and mechanically bulked out to kill the appetite and deceive the gut — is unnatural, almost immoral, a bane to good eating and good cooking. — Julia Child

<sup>2</sup> Overheard: My fake plants died because I did not pretend to water them. We are living in a world today where lemonade is made from artificial flavors and furniture polish is made from real lemons.

Today, we explore the false (idolatry) on the way to finding the TRUE.

#### **Idolatry**

##### **Idolatry Defined**

*What it’s not...*

Knowing that we were going to be considering the theme of idolatry this morning, I wondered what entered the mind of most Americans when they hear the word “idolatry.” So, I googled it. And I discovered that the first mental connection with idolatry for the majority of Americans has something to do with a television show.

Search “idolatry” and among the first hits you will get will be links to the show, “American Idol.”

Now, there might be some connection between American Idol and what the Bible has to say about idolatry, but I’m not going there today. Today, we’ll think about the more classic and biblical understanding of idolatry.

*The word*

The English word derives from a combination of two Greek words. “eidolon” (image) and “latreia” (worship).

Thus, idolatry is the worship of an image. More precisely, at least as the Bible uses the term, *idolatry* is the worship of anything other than God.

And idolatry is considered a major sin in what are often referred to as the “Abrahamic religions” (Judaism, Islam, Christianity).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Neither the word nor the concept are found in ancient secular Greek literature.

*...in the eye of the beholder*

Of course, in those religions and worldviews that do not embrace the idea of one God, the whole concept of “idolatry” is absent.

I’m not all that familiar with Hinduism. But I doubt if a believer in Hinduism would be much concerned about idolatry. Nor would the many, many millions of people around the world who are animists.

Idolatry is the special concern of people who believe that there is one God. These people - like us! - are concerned that God should be worshiped for who He is, that no one and nothing else should be worshipped. We believe that the worship of anything or anyone other than God is sinful - idolatrous.

But idolatry is present in the world today. It has had a long run. In fact, it had a long history by the time Jeremiah wrote, 2600 years ago.

### **Idolatry’s Origins**

*Option 1: Humanity evolved into monotheism*

Some people believe that the worship of many gods and goddesses was the first expression of mankind’s religious bent.

Some anthropologists suggest that our ancestors first worshiped what they did not understand - the elements of nature, the sun, the moon, and the stars. Then, they attributed human traits to these objects. That led to the worship of gods and goddesses. Then this polytheism evolved into a monotheistic view that one God ruled over all.

The Bible’s “take” is quite different...

*Option 2: Humanity devolved into idolatry*

The Bible tells us that **“in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”**

And then the Bible assures us that humanity began with the knowledge of and the worship of this one God.

Then - and this happened very early on - people moved away from this truth, rejected the one true God and worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator.

The truth is that polytheism and the worship of nature and images and idols didn’t *evolve* into monotheism. Polytheism *devolved* from a rejection of monotheism.

And sadly, you can go back all the way to Genesis and find people involved in the worship of that which is not God. Even more sadly, there is no period in Old Testament history when the Jewish people were free from an attraction to idolatry.

### **Idolatry and the Jews**

*In the days of the patriarchs*

The father of the faithful, Abraham, was an idolator before the Lord called and blessed him.<sup>4</sup> Three generations later, Rachel (the wife of Abraham’s grandson, Jacob) was found to be in possession of household idols!

*In Egypt*

While the descendants of Abraham were spending four hundred years as slaves in Egypt, they worshiped the gods of Egypt. And there is evidence that when they left Egypt they came out with Egyptian idols in tow!

*In the wilderness*

Within a few months of crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites found themselves at the base of Mount Sinai, waiting for Moses to return with the Law. But they got impatient of waiting and made a golden calf to worship - committing idolatry while waiting for the command that would tell them to not commit idolatry!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Joshua 24:2.

<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 32.

### *In the Promised Land*

They entered the promised land - and promptly worshiped the gods of the Canaanites and the Philistines. Read the stories of Gideon, Samson and Samuel and you'll be impressed with how quickly they succumbed to the temptation to idolatry.

### *During the reigns of the Kings*

And then, idolatry was a constant during the time of the kings in both the north (Israel) and the south (Judah).

- Elijah mocked the priests of Baal (who were serving King Ahab and Queen Jezebel) during the showdown on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18:27)
- Idolatry flourished in the days of Solomon.<sup>6</sup>
- Jeroboam (the first northern king) enticed the Jews to worship golden calves.<sup>7</sup>
- Idolatry flourished in the south under Rehoboam, Solomon's son.
- In Hezekiah's day the people worshiped the bronze serpent Moses had made (prompting Hezekiah to destroy the snake).
- And King Manasseh was famous for reviving idolatrous worship, defiling the Temple and offering his own son as a sacrifice to idols.

### **Idolatry's Ugliness**

*Always referred to in derogatory ways*

Amazing.

The Jewish people had a unique relationship with the true God - and repeatedly turned to idols. They were commanded to have nothing to do with idols - the second of the Ten Commandments is all about not practicing idolatry! - and still practiced idolatry.

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<sup>6</sup> This would be in part due to his many marriages to foreign women whom the Bible says turned his heart away from the Lord.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 17:7-18 - God explains that the destruction of the northern kingdom was due to the people's idolatry.

God warned them to avoid idolatry, even by the way He referred to the idols!

Sometimes, He called them ***“that which can be rolled around”*** (Ezekiel 20:31). Other times, they are called ***“trouble”*** or ***“sorrow”*** or ***“dread”*** or ***“terror”*** (Isaiah 66:3; Jeremiah 50:38).

In every way, the Jews were made to see that idols were lifeless and powerless. And more than that, they were assured that to engage in idolatry, to worship anything other than God, would do terrible damage.

### *The damage idolatry does*

What harm does idolatry do? Well, it degrades both God and man!

If there is a God who is like the God described in the Bible, then He - and He alone - deserves to be worshiped. To worship anything or anyone other than Him robs Him of what is due Him.

But idolatry damages the people who practice it, too!

It debases the person who engages in it. Imagine someone worshiping that which is not God, or worshiping what he wrongly thinks God to be like, or worshiping what he has made with his own hands. This delusion can only lead to disaster!

He'll be disappointed when his “god” doesn't offer comfort or hope when times get tough. And he'll be devastated when, in the end, his “god” doesn't provide salvation!

The Bible's prohibition against images was not put in place because the authors of the Bible had something against art and sculpture! It was put in place to assure that God would receive the honor He deserves and to point people to the only Source of meaning and purpose and fullness there is.

Despite the warnings, though, by the time we come to the life and times of Jeremiah, Israel has had a long and sad history of involvement with idolatry.

Despite what she knew about the Lord and despite what she had been commanded by God (“*You shall have no other gods before Me...*” and “*You shall not make for yourself an idol...*”) God’s people repeatedly strayed into the worship of that which is not God.

So, early in his prophetic career, Jeremiah hiked into Jerusalem and stood up to speak. I doubt that this was a message anybody really wanted to hear.<sup>8</sup> It was to be another in a series of “bad news” messages. This time, the bad news was really bad.

Turn to the seventh chapter and you’ll listen to Jeremiah issuing warning after warning to the people of Jerusalem. He delivers this message while standing at the gate leading into the Temple itself. He told the people,

- “*Don’t think that just because you come to the Temple you’ll escape God’s angry judgment!*” (7:4)
- “*Don’t presume that you can sin with impunity just because you are His child!*” (7:8-11)
- “*Don’t think that God won’t discipline you for your misbehavior - He’s done it to His people time after time after time!*” (7:12-15)<sup>9</sup>

Jeremiah told the people that the Lord had actually told him to not even pray for them because He wasn’t going to listen to those prayers anyway. (7:16)

And what was it that the people were doing that was so horrible? They were practicing idolatry. They were opting for a fake set of gods rather than worshiping the only God there is.

Most all of the prophets railed against idolatry,<sup>10</sup> and Jeremiah was as vehement against the worship of false gods as any of them.

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<sup>8</sup> Gleason Archer says that the major theme of this prophecy consists of giving a stern warning to Judah to turn from idolatry and sin to avoid the catastrophe of exile.

<sup>9</sup> If God destroyed Shiloh for its sinfulness, He will also surely destroy Jerusalem for its sinfulness. (7:12-15)

<sup>10</sup> The exceptions would be Jonah (whose prophecy is given in narrative form) and the post-exilic prophets (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) who did not need to rebuke idolatry. The Jews learned their lesson from the Babylonian captivity and never again worshipped false gods. (Not that they therefore always worshiped God...)

At various spots in his book we find him weighing in against idolatry as it was practiced in Jerusalem. In this particular message, he starts off with a rebuke of the people for their worship of Baal, a god of the Canaanites.

### **Idolatry in Jeremiah**

#### **Against Baal (2:23-24; 7:9)**

*[7:9] Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known...<sup>11</sup>*

There are lots of references to Baal and to Baal worship in the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> It was thought that the god Baal controlled the weather and fertility. He is often pictured with a lightning bolt in his hand and was considered the most powerful god in the Canaanite pantheon of gods.

Because of his association with fertility, the worship of Baal usually involved ritual prostitution. Jeremiah tells us that child sacrifice was also associated with the worship of Baal. (Jeremiah 19:5)

There were lots of centers for the worship of Baal scattered throughout the land of Canaan. In the days of Jeremiah, he and his images were worshiped in the valley of Ben-hinnom, a valley just south and west of Jerusalem.

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<sup>11</sup> *[Jeremiah 2:23] “How can you say, ‘I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals’?*

*Look at your way in the valley!*

*Know what you have done!*

*You are a swift young camel entangling her ways,*

*[24] A wild donkey accustomed to the wilderness,*

*That sniffs the wind in her passion.*

*In the time of her heat who can turn her away?*

*All who seek her will not become weary;*

*In her month they will find her.*

<sup>12</sup> “Baal” literally means “lord” or “master.”

The Jews were worshipping Baal! Read about their worship of Baal in chapter 2 and you get the sense that God's people were out of control, like addicts. They just couldn't stop themselves from going after Baal!<sup>13</sup>

In this speech Jeremiah gave at the Temple gate he mentions the Jews' fascination with a goddess referred to as "the queen of heaven."<sup>14</sup>

### Against the Queen of Heaven (7:16-20)

*[7:17] "Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? [18] "The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven;<sup>15</sup> and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me."<sup>16</sup>*

The queen of heaven was a goddess associated with the planet Venus. In Assyria, she was called "Ishtar." In Canaan, she was known as "Astarte" or "Ashtoreth" and was a fertility goddess.

It has been suggested by some Bible scholars that in a weird and awful syncretistic meshing of Judaism and Canaanite religion, the queen of heaven was thought to be the consort of Yahweh, the god of Israel. If this is what was being practiced, it would certainly be what Jeremiah was objecting to.

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<sup>13</sup> The images of chapter 2 are vividly sexual. Young camels were known to be unreliable and ungainly. Donkeys in heat were known to be violent in their search for a male. Thus, Israel is portrayed as unreliable (does not keep her covenant with God) and enslaved by a passion to seek the Baals.

<sup>14</sup> There is a long-standing tradition in Roman Catholic theology to refer to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the "Queen of Heaven." While I (and most Protestants) would object to this designation, Catholics are not committing the sin of ancient Israel when they worshiped the pagan "Queen of Heaven."

<sup>15</sup> These cakes were made in the form of a person, usually female, accentuating female features.

<sup>16</sup> See also Jeremiah 44:15-19 and note how the people were linking their provision of food to the offerings they were making to the queen of heaven. What an affront to God!

Then, the Jews worshiped - as if they were gods! - the sun, moon, and stars!<sup>17</sup>

### Against the Host of Heaven (8:1-2)

*[8:1] "At that time," declares the Lord, "they will bring out the bones of the kings of Judah and the bones of its princes, and the bones of the priests and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of Jerusalem from their graves. [2] "They will spread them out to the sun, the moon and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved and which they have served, and which they have gone after and which they have sought, and which they have worshiped. They will not be gathered or buried; they will be as dung on the face of the ground. (see also 19:13)*

Now the Bible declares that the sun, moon, and stars are indeed wonders to behold. You and I know what a delight it is to gaze at a star-studded night sky, or to watch a moon- or sunset or a sun- or moonrise. It's great stuff. As the psalmist writes, the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19).

But over and over again, Scripture tells us to not worship the host of heaven. (Deuteronomy 4:19) In the days of Jeremiah, that is exactly what the Jews were doing!

Idolatry flourished in the days of Jeremiah as the people worshiped Baal, the queen of heaven, the host of heaven and many more false gods besides these. At one point Jeremiah says that the gods worshiped by the Jews of his day were as numerous as the cities and towns of Judah.<sup>18</sup>

And the prophet desperately wanted his people - God's people! - to cease and desist worshiping anyone and anything other than God.

At one point he resorted to ridicule to try to get his fellow Jews to see just how foolish idolatry is!

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<sup>17</sup> The Canaanite culture was awash in the worship of the host of heaven. Some place names reflect this. "Beth-shemesh" means "the house of the sun." "Jericho" was named after the moon god, "Yerah."

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah 11:13.

## Mocking the Futility of Idolatry (10:1-10)

*[10:1] Hear the word which the Lord speaks to you, O house of Israel.*

*[2] Thus says the Lord,*

*“Do not learn the way of the nations,*

*And do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens*

*Although the nations are terrified by them;*

*[3] For the customs of the peoples are delusion;*

*Because it is wood cut from the forest,*

*The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool.*

*[4] “They decorate it with silver and with gold;*

*They fasten it with nails and with hammers*

*So that it will not totter.*

*[5] “Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they,*

*And they cannot speak;*

*They must be carried,*

*Because they cannot walk!*

*Do not fear them,*

*For they can do no harm,*

*Nor can they do any good.”*

*...[8] But they are altogether stupid and foolish*

*In their discipline of delusion—their idol is wood!*

*[9] Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish,*

*And gold from Uphaz,*

*The work of a craftsman and of the hands of a goldsmith;*

*Violet and purple are their clothing;*

*They are all the work of skilled men.<sup>19</sup>*

Bottom line? The worship of anything but God is both sinful and silly. It makes no sense to praise, pray to, throw money at or otherwise worship something that IS NOT. And the Jews of ancient Israel were doing exactly that.

Throughout history people around the world have practiced idolatry. It occurs among many people to this day.

<sup>19</sup> See also Isaiah 44:9-20; Hosea 8:5; 13:2; Habakkuk 2:18 for some scathing rebukes for idolatry, very sarcastic.

## Idolatry Today

### **In Pagan Lands**

If you went to some of the lands where some of the missionaries we support are serving Jesus you would find devout Hindus worshipping many idols, Muslims worshipping that which we would not call “God” and tribal people in Africa worshipping ancestors and nature gods.

The worship of non-existent gods (and this is *idolatry* as the Bible defines it) is alive and well in 2009!

But - and this is critical - Jeremiah was speaking to the people of God, not to the other nations. As troubling as it is that any people would worship anything other than the one true God, the burden of the Bible is that God’s people should not do this.

It was horrible that people who had entered into a covenant relationship with the Lord would turn to idols! And it happened from the days of Abraham (2,000 BC) right up to the time of Jeremiah (600 BC).

We might like to think that with the advent of Christianity, idolatry ceased to be a concern for the people of God. Christians would never struggle with idolatry. If we had that thought, we would be wrong.

### **Among God’s People (?!?!)**

*Idolatry was a real problem among the first Christians*

In the early days of the church, one of the biggest challenges revolved around how Jews and Gentiles were to get along in one Jesus-centered movement.

It was such a big issue that an all-church council was convened in Jerusalem with representatives from both Jewish and non-Jewish factions. They discussed and debated and debated and discussed.

Here’s what they finally came up with.

The word went out to the Gentile Christians that they should *[Acts 15:20]...abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood.*<sup>20</sup>

Among the first Christians were those who were delivered from idolatry - and it took them a while to wholly put away their idolatrous ways.

The Jerusalem decree provided a helpful step toward unity in the church. But that didn't mean idolatry was a problem of the past.

*Greed = idolatry*

Late in his ministry, while a prisoner under house arrest in Rome, the apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in the city of Colossae.

In the course of instructing and exhorting these believers to lead God-honoring lives, he said this.

***[Colossians 3:5] Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry.***

Fascinating. Paul says that greed amounts to idolatry.

It's easy to see where he is coming from.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that it is impossible to serve God and mammon (Matthew 6:24). So, if a Christian is "serving" mammon (or money, material things) it is service of THAT instead of GOD. That's idolatry.

Did you notice that our understanding of idolatry just got hugely expanded? It turns out that idolatry doesn't require wooden symbols of male or female deities. Idolatry is giving first place to anything other than God.

And there are other warnings that tell us that idolatry is as real and present a danger for the child of God in 2009 as it was in the days of Jeremiah.<sup>21</sup>

Chief among them is a comment John makes at the very end of his first letter.

*Warnings against idolatry*

Although we don't know to whom John's first letter (1 John) was written, it has all the marks of being a letter sent to a particular church that was dealing with specific challenges.

It is a five chapter letter that addresses fellowship - the fellowship that believers are to enjoy with each other and the fellowship that believers are to enjoy with God.

There is not one mention of idolatry in the body of the letter.

John writes about the need to love and about the nature of God. God is light. God is holy. God is forgiving. God is love. Jesus is God. Jesus came in the flesh.

Seemingly coming out of nowhere, John wraps up his letter with these words: ***[1 John 5:21] Little children, guard yourselves from idols.***

This abrupt introduction of idolatry at the conclusion of the letter has driven readers crazy. Why would John bring in the topic of idol worship at the very end and not develop the thought?

In fact, John had been developing the thought all along! The bulk of the five chapters of 1 John were written to teach who God is and to teach about His ways and to refute false teachings (*idolatrous* teachings).

John is warning us against being misled into the worship of any other kind of God than the God he has described. To do so would be to fall into idolatry.

<sup>20</sup> See the whole story in Acts 15; note also Acts 21:25.

<sup>21</sup> Paul may have had in mind a literal flight from the pagan idolatry that was so common among the mostly Gentile churches he served when he wrote, ***[1 Corinthians 10:14] Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.***

Idolatry is the worship of anything other than God. It can manifest in people falling down before wooden images of male or female deities. It can manifest itself in greedy materialism, where we place anything before our devotion to God. And idolatry can be manifested in wrong thinking about who God truly is.

You and I are not likely to be tempted by the first manifestation to idolatry, but the second and the third could sure trip us up!

So, how can we keep from idolatry? What is the best guard against putting something other than God first? How can we avoid the fatal error of giving ourselves to something or someone other than the one true God?

Both John and Jeremiah would tell us that more than anything else we need to have a firm grasp on who God really is. So, who is this God we are called to worship?

### **Conclusion:**

- *He is a majestic, omnipotent, Sovereign*

He is the Creator who stands separate from His creation.

God created everything there is. Go outside on a clear night and marvel at His handiwork in the heavens. Your body is a wonder designed by God. The intricate orchestration of weather patterns and seasons and plant and animal life and tides, all hinging on the precise tilt of the planet with respect to the sun, are His ideas.

Kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall - and God is over it all. He was in control when Babylon and Assyria vied for world supremacy. He is in control today. Nothing that happens on the world scene - from rising oil prices to erratic markets to the Islamization of Europe surprises God. He knows and controls it all.

In addition to being a majestic, omnipotent Sovereign, God is a holy and righteous Judge.

- *He is a righteous and holy Judge*

There is good and there is evil in our world. In the end, God will right all wrongs. He will judge all evil. He will call all people everywhere to account for the sin they have committed. God will show no partiality. Jews and non-Jews, civilized and aborigines, every race, first or third world inhabitant, Americans and Iranians and North Koreans will all answer for their thoughts, words, and deeds.

In the end you and I and every other person who has ever lived will say of God, "*He is indeed a righteous Judge.*"

And God is a loving Father.

- *He is a loving Father*

The best father any child has ever known pales in comparison to the care that God provides for His children. While He will allow them to stray, He will lovingly discipline them. He will allow them to suffer - even for doing His will - but in the end He will richly reward them.

This Father loves perfectly. He is compassionate and kind and forgiving. And He is the Father of every person who has placed their trust in His Son, Jesus, for eternal salvation. All who come to God through Jesus will find the Father they have always longed for.

We don't mind fake flowers. And an imitation Beatles concert might be fun. We might even stop off for some fake food at a notoriously bad-for-you restaurant from time to time.

But we can't live right without God - the real thing.

Years ago, an American author and pastor, A.W. Tozer, wrote, "*The most important thing about us is what first enters our mind when we think 'God'.*" Jeremiah would have agreed.

I hope that what enters your mind when you think "God" this week are thoughts of a majestic, all-powerful Sovereign, a holy and righteous Judge, and a loving Father. This is who the Bible reveals God to truly be. Anything else is just an idol.