

## **God & Idols: Sermon on Jeremiah 10 – Sunday, 24 January 2021**

Good morning to everyone – and thanks to Roger for the introduction and his prayers.

I would guess that many of us have heard of the expression – ‘never meet your idols’ which is referring to the situation of getting the opportunity of meeting face to face with someone that we have never previously met but have admired, revered, or held in high regard from afar – and that we have been disappointed by some aspect or facet of their personality, and that they were not as perfect or wonderful as we thought they were or indeed might have been the very opposite. Humans have an enormous propensity to idolise both people and things. It seems to be part of our nature and it is about this that I want to speak this morning.

And so, we are continuing our sermon series on the Old Testament book of Jeremiah and we have now reached chapter 10. And the topic of our reading this morning is God & idols. When I first read over the passage a couple of weeks ago in preparation for this morning, I thought ‘mmm, God & idols – that seems pretty straightforward’. ‘God good, idols bad – no problem’. But there is much more below the surface of this topic and I want to share my thoughts with you in my talk.

Let us start with a bit of background. Worshiping idols is a major theme of Jeremiah and it would seem to be for a particularly good reason. The passage is a major warning about the dangers of this practice and God’s judgement upon it. Jeremiah is not using his own words, but words that have been specifically given to him from God, to tell of His displeasure with the actions of the people of Judah in this regard. You get the sense that Jeremiah is incredibly frustrated at his countrymen for their idol worship which had been going on for an exceptionally long time, and he is not afraid to let them know about it. Worshiping idols has caused the people of Judah to turn away from God and has resulted in behaviour and actions that is in direct opposition to what is laid down in the Law and what is required for worshiping a holy God. The people of Judah have rejected Jeremiah’s preaching, they have rejected the words of God spoken to them. Despite their actions, Jeremiah loves his

people, is concerned for them, and wants to warn them of the consequences of their lifestyle. These warnings, however, did for the most part fall on deaf ears and gained Jeremiah a reputation as a traitor and bearer of bad news. The Judeans absolutely did not want to hear anything about their idolatry and did not want to listen to the warnings that Jeremiah was giving.

So, I want to talk about what Jeremiah is telling us in the passage and think about what this means for us today. It might be helpful to understand what idol worship meant in Jeremiah's time. Many previous kings of Judah had succumbed to worshipping local pagan deities which they had picked up from the nations neighbouring their country. The most notable of these was Baal, supposedly the dominant of these pagan deities and one that was strongly linked to fertility, both in the sense of the land and of people. As if worshipping idols was not bad enough in itself, the associated activities that went along with it were even more shocking and directly against all the laws of the Jewish people. These activities included human sacrifice, ritual prostitution, sorcery, self-inflicted injury and worship of man-made artifacts, the stars, and planets amongst other things. And all of this is going on in the full knowledge that worshipping idols is explicitly forbidden in the first two of the ten commandments – in the first commandment, God tells us that you shall have no other gods before me, and the second that you shall not make for yourself an idol and you shall not bow down to them or worship them. God's view of idolatry could not really be made any more plainly.

Our passage contrasts very clearly between God and idols – idols are created by people. They are inanimate and cannot speak or move – we are not to fear them or be worried that they can do us any harm in themselves. Contrast this with our Creator God who made the heavens and the earth and all things in them. When we look at this way, when we consider the differences between them, we should be thinking – how do they even begin to compare? How is it even conceivable to put worshipping idols before worshipping God? It does not even begin to make any sense whatsoever. Jeremiah speaks of how much effort it takes for craftsmen to make an idol, with raw materials coming from faraway places, all with a view of conferring the idols with some degree of worthiness of worship. There seems to be an underlying message of why

waste all this time in making idols when you have a true and wonderful God right in front on you.

And Jeremiah is clear about the consequences of idolatry. Idol worship is a most serious problem and one that calls down judgement from the Lord. If we are worshipping idols, we are not worshipping God. If we are worshipping idols, we are leading a false life and taking a wrong path. And Jeremiah will go on to say that exile is coming because of their actions, and that there will be separation of Judah from their land, their temple and their God and it is only through this exile that they can be reconciled once again to God. I will talk a little bit more about this in a few moments.

Before that, let us talk a bit about idolatry in general terms.

We might ask ourselves - why did the Judeans and indeed, why do humans in general, have such a tendency towards idolatry? We can say two things about this – that idolatry is about playing to human desires and that idolatry is a spiritual battle. Idolatry focuses on the fulfilment of our own desires, before acknowledging God or meeting the needs of our neighbour. Idolatry is self-centred– it does not put God first in our lives. Idolatry pushes us toward sin – it looks to enslave us once again. From a Christian perspective, it is the exact opposite of what we ought to be doing with our lives. In terms of the spiritual battle, like many aspects of evil, it turns upside down the beautiful nature of God and parodies holiness and real worship. Although not explicitly mentioned by Jeremiah in our passage, evil forces have always been at work to divert us from worshipping God and it seems that we have been more than willing accomplices. Self-indulgence has always had a stronger pull than self-discipline for many people.

What are some of the attributes of idolatry that we might recognise in our modern world?

It is possible that we might dismiss idolatry as the foolishness of ancient civilisations. What has it got to do with us in our modern, enlightened world? We are smarter now and do not worship bits of wood adorned with precious metals. Yet perhaps we are not so different in our times after all, perhaps the idols are just a bit different. Rather than craftsmen working with hammered silver from Tarshish and gold from Uphaz, we have luxury red automobiles

made by robots in northern Italy, or shiny technology embossed with logos made in China.

Idolatry bows to the popular, to the predominant culture, to the crowd. We are bombarded daily with images of idols of every kind. In Jeremiah's times and now, being counter cultural is extremely difficult. Many people, from a spiritual standpoint, do not want to be different or stand out from the crowd – this, as Jeremiah clearly demonstrates, takes a lot of courage to do.

Instead of worshipping a perfect God, idolatry is the worship of imperfection. In fact, it is a failure of worship, as we are not giving to God the glory and honour to which He is due. And it has often been said that 'we are what we worship'. If we worship celebrities, sports teams or riches and material things, we are likely to reflect them in our own behaviour. If we worship someone or something that is arrogant, self-regarding, or focussed on celebrating the trappings of success or status, we are already on a road that is the exact opposite of what we know of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Worship of idols is not particularly costly, in terms of denying ourselves. It is the easy road, the road well-travelled. It plays to our own demands and not to the needs of others. It requires no personal sacrifice or restraint.

And there are plenty of things that idolatry cannot do. It cannot heal, it gives no thought to peace, to the absence of fear and anxiety, of service to others, and most importantly, it cannot save. Idolatry thinks of nothing beyond this life. There is really nothing good to say about idolatry.

To idolise something is to give it power over us. Alternatively, we infer powers on to idols that do not exist in themselves but are reflections of ourselves. In truth, the only power that we want holding on to us is the power of the Holy Spirit.

And I want to stretch our definition of idols a little bit – beyond material things, physical desire, success, and status into some areas that we might not have previously thought about, into more subtle forms of idolatry but which are just as real. Pretty much anything can become an idol including things related to our faith. Humans have this unique knack of making anything into something that can be idolised – maybe we have in mind a perfect lifestyle, or a cultural

environment that we want to be a part of, and we go in single-minded pursuit of it. We can idolise our own views and opinions, our standpoint on issues, our views of certain groups of people. Bottom line – we could be idolising something without really knowing about it! We must take great care not to go down these roads.

As I said earlier, idolatry has consequences. Jeremiah has a lot of say about judgement – it is another one of his central themes. And because of Judah's idolatry was so entrenched, so all-encompassing and had so hardened their hearts, that they showed no signs of repentance and change, God sent them into exile in Babylon. It was the only way to stop this pandemic of idolatry. And often in God's word, love and judgement go together, held in divine tension. There is always the possibility of renewal. God often must break us down before he can rebuild us – we cannot come close to God if we are so preoccupied with idolatry. We are to be emptied before we are filled. There is the old joke – God could not fill him with the Holy Spirit because he was so full of himself. Love and grace get the last word, and we should be extremely thankful for that.

And studying this passage made me ask - what are my idols? Now, if you want the service to go on for another couple of hours, then I could talk about them. But you will be happy to know that I am just going to mention a couple of things. I am thankful that God has opened my eyes to things in my life that I never thought were idols, that were subtly masquerading themselves as personality traits, but had to be highlighted for what they are and addressed through prayer and seeking forgiveness. This is a lifelong task for all of us.

How should we speak of idolatry – to Christians & non-Christians, to our community and those we encounter in our lives? Unfortunately, from a non-Christian perspective, it is unlikely that people will relate to our description of idolatry – in fact, in our culture, idolatry seems to be actively encouraged! I have already mentioned that people idolised social media influencers, celebrities, pop stars, football players – it is hard to speak of the huge emptiness of all this worship. Pointing them to Jesus Christ may be the start of filling this emptiness. Speaking to Christians, what can we say about idolatry? It goes against our purpose – to know God and glorify Him and to do His will. Perhaps we can quote a verse from the previous chapter of Jeremiah (9:23–

24a) - Yet this is what the Lord says: 'Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches but let those who boast, boast about this: that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord'. Perhaps the surest antidote to idolatry is looking to Jesus Christ - contemplating Him and His character will turn our minds away from the power of the self or the perceived power of the idol.

On the face of it, the message of this passage seems rather straightforward, whereas in reality, it should really challenge us. If we are putting God first, then clearly there is no room for idols of any description. God and idols do not mix - idols can only separate us from God. We cannot become our true selves in God if we are chasing something other than God. I also feel that Jeremiah is talking to us about individual responsibility. Every single one of us should understand that if you are going to put God first in your heart, you do not have any room for anything or anyone else to supplant the place of God in your life or actions. God does not want anything to come between Him and us – and as I started off by saying, He does not want us to meet any idols. And we can ask for his strength and guidance in showing us and dealing with our own idols, both around us and within us. In the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, we ask this.

Amen