

“AMERICAN IDOL #1 (IN GOD WE TRUST?)”

(Exodus 20:1-5a; Proverbs 11:24-28)

© 2010 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 8-1-10]

–I–

1. [Traditional Service ONLY:] Read Text: Exodus 20:1-5a; Proverbs 11:24-28 and Pray.

2. [VIDEO INTRODUCTION TO SERIES (“American Idol” theme music & logo)]...

A–From our publicity, some of you may have thought that we’re starting a new series on the popular TV show hosted by Ryan Seacrest – in fact, some of you were *counting on that*, weren’t you?

B–Well, not to disappoint, but while I *am* using the title (and the intro music), what I really want to talk about over the next four weeks is not so much the idols of a particular *TV show*, but more importantly the idols of American *culture* itself,...

C–...Because while it’s true that many hearts have been captured by the singing performances of the contestants/idols of this show, unfortunately I also believe that many more hearts are being captured and stolen away by the idols that we find in our culture today.

3. Now, it’s true that one definition of the word “idol” is simply “*a person or object of extreme devotion,*”¹ like we find in the TV show.

A–But the definition that we’re focusing on in this series is more closely related to a biblical concept which we find in today’s first scripture from Exodus 20.

[Contemp. Service ONLY: Let me read it for you... (Read MSG, Exodus 20:1-5a)]

(MSG) *1 God spoke all these words: 2 I am God, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery. 3 No other gods, only me. 4 No carved gods of any size, shape, or form of anything whatever, whether of things that fly or walk or swim. 5 Don’t bow down to them and don’t serve them...*

(NRSV) *1 Then God spoke all these words: 2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; 3 you shall have no other gods before me. 4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them.*

B–The Hebrew word here often translated as “idol” literally means a “*phantom/false god*” – as in... a god that’s not real; something/someone that purports (or is thought) to have the *power* of a god, but in reality does *not*.²

C–So in biblical terms, then, an “idol” is anything that we put in the place of Almighty God – it doesn’t have to have overtly religious or spiritual elements; it’s simply something or someone that we put our trust and faith in *besides* the Lord God.

4. Now by that definition, there are probably hundreds of things that might qualify as “idols” in today’s American culture.

A–But since we obviously don’t have time to talk about *all* of them, in this series I want us to address four of them that are pervasive in our culture today:...

B–...What are they? What dangers do they present? And how can we avoid being captured by them (or escape from them if we’ve already been)? (*See bulletin sermon notes...*)

–II–

5. Let’s begin today by looking at the “idol” of **Materialism** – how it is that too often we find our money and possessions possessing *us*.

A–You know, in 2009 1.4 million people filled for bankruptcy (up 1/3 from the year before), and in the first quarter of this year (2010), there were nearly 400,000 (+17% from 2009).³

B–Added to that was a record 2.8 million foreclosures in 2009 (+21% from 2008, and +120% from 2007), & estimates are that 2010 foreclosure figures will top that.⁴

C–As of May of this year, total consumer debt in the U.S. stood at nearly \$2.5 trillion, which averages out to over \$8,000 of unsecured debt for every man, woman and child in America⁵ – that’s a heavy amount of debt!

D–All this has led to an estimated 2.5 million adults who are pathologically addicted to gambling, and another 20 million who are “at risk” for becoming so.⁶

E–And of course, many of us (and in fact, many economists) have already recognized that the recent American economic crisis can be traced in large part directly to our inability *as a society* to properly handle money and possessions.

6. Now, these facts alone don’t fully explain the nature and character of Materialism, but they *are* certainly *symptoms of it*,...

A–...Because even the dictionary defines “Materialism” as a belief that “*the only (or highest) values/objectives lie in material well-being & in the furtherance of material progress*”⁷ – which is what the facts that I’ve shared seem to indicate that we’re doing as a society.

B–Materialism, you see, is basically when we have an improper perspective towards – and an unbalanced practice in using – material things.

C–It’s when we allow our money and possessions to become *ends* in themselves, rather than *means* to an end.⁸

7. It's when *things* become more important than the *people & relationships* they exist to serve.

A—Perhaps you've heard of the single man who advertised in a newspaper this way:
 “*Man (30) desires woman (with tractor) for wife. Send picture of tractor.*”

B—Well, that's really the world that we live in... a world where “things” (and the accumulation of things) is often more important than almost anything else.

1—You know, my mother *loves* to collect dishes. She has dishes for almost *any* and *every* occasion that you could think of. And as her family, we're constantly buying her new sets, and lovingly teasing her about her great collection!

2—She has so many dishes, in fact, that she recently had my dad convert one of the downstairs closets into a china cupboard for all the dishes that wouldn't fit either in their kitchen cabinets, in the breakfast area, or in formal dining room!

3—Now, I love my mom, and I asked her permission before sharing this, but the thing is... there are only *two* of them living there. So,... how many dishes can *TWO* people really need at any *ONE* time?

C—It's kind of like some women and their full closets of shoes... or some men and their collection of power tools... or me and all the books in my office that I'll never read... or some people and the house that's twice the size – or the car that 3x as expensive – as what they actually *need* (or can even afford!)

D—Part of Materialism, you see, involves our over-accumulation of possessions that we *really* could get by *without*.⁹

8. Another example: Do me a favor... take out a dollar bill if you have one (or any currency, for that matter)... Now, hold it up... so our ushers can come by and pick up... just kidding.

A—No, really this time...turn to the back, and look at what says under “*United States of America*”? What does it say?... (Answer: “*In God We Trust*”)

1—My question is: As a nation, and as individuals... Do we *really* DO that? Do we “Trust in *God*?” (that today's message title, isn't it?)

2—Or, do we more commonly place our faith and trust in the almighty dollar itself?

B—You see, that's what Materialism is... the misplacing of our trust and faith in temporal, worldly things (like money or possessions) that'll eventually let us down.

9. So, given the pervasiveness of Materialism throughout our culture today, how can we realistically avoid it (and how can we escape if we've already been captured by it?)

A—Well, today's second scripture from Proverbs 11 actually outlines a principle and practice that helps us steer clear of the noose of Materialism. (Vss. 24-25 & 28)...

(MSG) *The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller. The one who blesses others is abundantly blessed; those who help others are helped. ...A life devoted to things is a dead life, a stump; [but] a God-shaped life is a flourishing tree."*

(NSRV) *Some give freely, yet grow all the richer; others withhold... and only suffer want. A generous person will be enriched, and one who gives water will get water ...Those who trust in their riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish like green leaves.*

B—Did you hear the key advice here? It's not rocket science, and it's not some secret principle that you have learn at a financial seminar! No. It's simply the principle of *GENEROSITY* and the practice of *GIVING!*

1—The Bible is saying here (and many other places) that a *generous spirit* is the antidote to Materialism.

2—Why? Because generosity shows us how to hold loosely onto *things* (which let us down) so that we can hold tightly onto *God* (who does not).

3—That's why the founder of Methodism John Wesley had three rules for the use of money that he encouraged his Methodists to follow – rules that will still work today: (1) *Earn all you can*; (2) *Save all you can*; but also ... (3) *Give all you can*.

C—You see, the purpose of Giving is not so much about the need of the receiver to *receive* the gift, but about the need of the giver to *give* it, lest they become ensnared by it.

D—In other words, God wants us to be generous with our time, our talents, *and* our money NOT because HE needs those things, but because He know that if WE don't GIVE them, we may very well become a slave to them! ¹⁰

–IV–

10. So, let me simply end by asking: Where is your trust placed? Where do you find ultimate security?

A—If you had everything you own taken away (by fire, tornado, a Wall Street collapse, a national financial crisis), what would you do? Your reaction might very well reveal where your ultimate trust is placed.

B—Would it be “*In God We Trust?*” Or, would you trust more in your money/possessions?

11. [PRAY: “*Lord Jesus, we confess that too often we as a people have allowed the ‘idol’ of Materialism to enslave and rule our lives. At times we’ve cared more over the condition of our IRAs, our homes, and our cars than for the condition of our souls. We’ve worried more about the money we’ve lost from our bank accounts than about the people around us who’ve lost their homes, or their livelihoods, or who can’t afford to even put food on the table. Forgive us, and help us to see the selfishness of our ways. And then, O God, give us the courage and boldness to become people of generosity and compassion – people who use our financial and material resources NOT just for our own benefit, but as a tool for the betterment of those around us. Teach us to hold loosely to things, so that we might learn to hold more tightly to you O God, Creator and Giver of ALL things. And we’ll give you the thanks and praise. In Jesus’ name, Amen.*”]
12. [During closing song invite people forward to pray to be free from the idol of Materialism]

ENDNOTES:

1. Mirriam-Webster online dictionary, word “Idol.”
2. Hebrew words are “pesel” (graven/human created) “tselem” (phantom/idol) (Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary, Terms H6429 and H6754).
3. From the CreditCard.com article “*Bankruptcies Resume Climbing, Aided by Tax Refunds*,” by Susan Ladika at www.creditcards.com/credit-card-news/bankruptcy-filings-q1-2010-continue-rising-1282.php.
4. From the Reuters.com article “*U.S. 2009 Foreclosures Shatter Record Despite Aid*,” by Lynn Adler at www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE60D0LZ20100114
5. From the Money-Zine.com page “*Consumer Debt Statistics*” at www.money-zine.com/Financial-Planning/Debt-Consolidation/Consumer-Debt-Statistics
6. From the ClearLead, Inc. website “*Gambling Addiction - Gambling Addiction Statistics*” at www.clearleadinc.com/site/gambling-addiction.html.
7. Mirriam-Webster online dictionary, word “Materialism.”
8. According to scripture, money and possessions are intended to be used as tools of goodness and compassion – tools given by God to us to help make the world a better place. The “end” is the enrichment of the lives of others, and material goods are mere meant to be the “means” by which we can accomplish this.
9. You’ve heard it said before, “*Live more simply, so that others may simply live.*”
10. As you may have heard me say before, this is precisely why in the Bible Jesus himself talks more about money and possessions than he does about love, prayer, and faith *combined*. Consider, for example, Luke 12:33-34, where Jesus calls his followers to...“*Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” Is Jesus saying here that we don’t need to have “things” at all? and that if we do, we need to sell it all? I don’t think so. I think his point is that if our trust (what the Bible calls our “heart”) is in what it calls our “treasure” – that is, in the “things” we “own”, whether it be our big house, our nice car, our techno gadgets, or our IRA’s or Stock Market portfolios – then we’ve actually become a slave to our *possessions*, and that if we want true freedom the best thing for us to do is get rid of them, lest their hold on us eventually destroys us.