

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 5, 2012**

IDOLS WE WORSHIP

Isaiah 44:6-20

For two Sundays prior to last Sunday (when Pastor David preached on Psalm 117), we had been considering “God’s Way to Reformation and Revival” revealed in Isaiah 43 and 44. We used Ray Ortlund, Jr.’s definitions of reformation as the recovery of God’s purpose for us, and revival as the recovery of God’s life in us. One thing is sure: we will not experience true reformation or revival in our lives or in our land if we insist on treasuring or worshiping idols of any kind. When reformation and revival come, if reformation and revival are to come, idolatry – the worship of anyone or anything other than the true and living God – must go. Let’s go back to Isaiah 44 today to see what the Lord has to say to us there. Let’s give our full and reverent attention now to the reading of God’s holy Word from Isaiah 44:6-20.

Super Bowl Sunday seems like a fitting occasion to talk about idols and idolatry, because for millions of people, football is the true American religion. I’ve heard a radio commercial probably dozens of times in which a male voice says: “There are only two seasons of the year: football season and getting ready for football season.” I don’t have any statistics this morning to back this up, but it seems like the “religion” of football has more adherents, and its adherents or followers exhibit more devotion and passion, than any traditional religious faith. If football is a religion, today – Super Bowl Sunday – is the high holy day of this religion. No less a cultural authority than Madonna (the entertainer who will perform at halftime of the Super Bowl tonight – not to be confused with the mother of Jesus) called the Super Bowl “the holy of holies in America,” and said of her scheduled performance: “I’m going to come in halfway (through) the church experience and ... (I) have to deliver a sermon that’s going to have to be very impactful” (quoted in *The Washington Post*, February 1, 2012).

Please don’t take this as a “holier-than-thou” rant against the Super Bowl, or a “thus says the Lord” that attending or hosting a Super Bowl gathering, or just watching the game, is an act of idolatry. That’s not it at all. Trust me when I say I’m not “holier-than-thou.” I know the Super Bowl provides a wonderful social opportunity to get together with friends or neighbors, to be the salt and light Jesus says we are to be (Matthew 5:14-16), just by being with others. And you can be sure that if either of my two favorite teams, the Steelers or the Redskins, were playing today, I’d be feeling pretty excited. No question about it. I’m not saying football is an idol in your life. I’m just saying it could be, and I’m afraid it is an idol in the lives of millions of Americans.

I hope you enjoy the game today and the opportunity it provides to build or renew relational ties with others. Enjoy rooting for your favorite team(s) throughout football season. But guard your heart from sinful pride, or from anger or despair, depending on how your team does. Guard your heart against making an idol of football. Don’t be like the guy in the radio commercial who thinks football season and getting ready for football season are the only two seasons of the year. Don’t let it become the center of your life.

Don't let football – or anything else – take the place of God in your life. That is really the essence of idolatry. An idol, it says in my Revell Bible Dictionary, is anything a person shapes or uses as an object of worship. Henry Blackaby defines “idol” as anything you turn to for help when God told you to turn to Him for help. St. Augustine said that idolatry is worshipping anything that ought to be used, or using anything that is meant to be worshiped. Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller, who has written a book entitled *Counterfeit Gods* (which is what idols are), makes this connection between idolatry and sin in general: “Sin isn't only doing bad things, it is more fundamentally making good things into ultimate things. Sin is building your life and meaning on anything, even a very good thing, more than on God. Whatever we build our life on will drive us and enslave us. Sin,” he says, “is primarily idolatry.”

American Idol is not just a television show or a music competition. There are lots of “American idols” today. Some are obvious to the most casual observer, while others are not so obvious. Among the gods we are tempted to worship are:

- Power – whether political or military power, or the power to influence or shape minds and hearts and the culture as a whole.
- Fame – which is at least one of the attractions for *American Idol* hopefuls.
- Money, wealth, material possessions and financial security, with an unceasing desire for more. “The idols of the nations are silver and gold,” it says in Psalm 135:15. They still are. And we could add oil to the list.
- Intellectual accomplishments or superiority.
- Success – however we define it, and it is different for different people.
- Approval from others can become an idol. Keller writes in *Counterfeit Gods* about a young woman, an accomplished musician, who attended his church in New York. For years she had battled mental illness, and had checked herself in and out of psychiatric institutions. She gave Keller permission to speak to her therapist, who said that this young woman “virtually worships her parents’ approval of her, and they always wanted her to be a world-class artist. She is quite good, but she has never reached the top of her profession, and she cannot live with the idea that she has disappointed her parents.” While medications helped to manage her depression, they could not get to the root of it. Her problem, says Keller, was a false belief, driven by an idol. She told herself: “If I cannot be a well-known violinist, I have let down my parents, and my life is a failure.” When she began to believe the gospel, that she was saved by grace, not by musicianship, and that, as it says in Psalm 27:10, “though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord shall take me in,” she began to get relief from her idolatrous need for her parents’ approval. In time her depression and anxiety began to lift, and she was able to reenter her life and profession as a musician (Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, pp. 148-149).

Parents, make sure you never do this to your children. Make sure you do not teach your children that your love and acceptance and approval of them are based on their achievements or accomplishments in life. Make sure you do not communicate to them that they must live up to your performance-based expectations in order to be loved. In order to have value and significance in their lives. If you did it when your children

were young, ask the Lord – and your kids – to forgive you. If you’re doing it now, or are still doing it, even if your kids are grown, stop. Repent. Ask the Lord to change your heart and mind, your attitudes and actions, so that you do not make an idol of your children’s achievements, and so that you do not cause them to make your approval an idol.

Young people, listen to me: Do not ever let the approval of your parents, your coaches or teachers, or your friends, become an idol in your life. Do not ever think your worth as a person is dependent on what others think of you or say about you. Do not ever think the value of your life is determined by your record of achievements, or by how many Facebook friends you have, or anything like that. Because it is just not true. Got it?

There are other counterfeit gods (to use Keller’s term), other idols we may be tempted to worship – things like freedom, or sex, or self. In the narcissistic idolatry of self, what matters most in life is *me*. The highest value and driving force in life is what makes *me* happy, what gives *me* pleasure, what makes *me* feel good, what serves *my* self-interest. It’s all about *me*. Do you know people who worship themselves? I do.

And lots of people today worship a god, an idol, of their own making. If there are things they have heard about God, or things they were taught about God, that they don’t like, or things about God they don’t understand, they simply throw out those things and create a picture of God the way they want God to be. In his book *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith concludes that most young evangelical Christians today believe in what he describes as “moral, therapeutic deism.” Here is what that means: *Moral* implies that God wants us to be nice (just like Santa Claus). God rewards those who are good and withholds blessings from the naughty. *Therapeutic* means that God just wants us to be happy. Our happiness is what matters most to God. *Deism* means that God is distant and not involved in our daily lives. He may intervene occasionally, but on the whole, God is more like an idea than a personal Being who is actively involved in our world. This, according to Smith, is what most young evangelicals believe – young men and women attending churches like ours.

I hope it is not true of anyone here today, young or old. But I realize it could be. To create a god of our own design, a god of our own imagination, a god-as-we-wish-god-to-be, is a powerful temptation, especially in a world that largely rejects the idea of absolute truth, and tells us that we can create our own truth.

Maybe we don’t do it the same way they did it in Isaiah’s day. Maybe we don’t do it the same way they did it throughout the history of the Old Testament. Maybe we don’t do it the way they did in the 1st-century world, when, for example, Paul went to Athens, the center of Greek philosophy and culture, and was, as it says in Acts 17:16, “greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.”

Our text in Isaiah 44 is an example of God-inspired, holy satire. Isaiah shows how foolish, how ridiculous, the whole idea of making a god out of iron or wood (or any other created thing) is. The carpenter, he says, cuts down a tree. Some of the wood he uses to make a fire

to keep him warm and to bake bread for him to eat. And some of the wood from the same tree he fashions into an idol which he then worships, and to which he prays for help and deliverance. As *The Message* paraphrase says in verse 18, “Pretty stupid, wouldn’t you say?”

Of course, it’s stupid. It’s crazy. And we are way too smart, way too sophisticated to do something like that. And yet, our world today – *our* world – is full of idols. They are everywhere. And the temptation to worship them, the temptation to worship *something*, *anything* other than God, gets in our faces every single day.

The reason Isaiah and the other prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Hosea, along with Moses and David and others in Israel’s history, made such a big deal about idols and idolatry, is because it *is* a big deal. The reason God Himself made such a big deal about it – and makes a big deal about it as He makes Himself known to us – is because idols *are* the problem. The worship of idols *is* the problem in today’s world.

There is so much more we could say today, so much more the Bible says about idols and idolatry in both the Old and New Testaments. But I must stop. I leave you with the closing words of the apostle John in 1 John 5:21. His final words, his final exhortation, in this letter are these: “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” Be on guard against the lure or temptation to worship any counterfeit gods. Be on guard against anything that would steal your heart. Do not allow anyone or anything to become more important in your life than God.

In the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God, in the power of God the Holy Spirit, worship, love and serve the Lord your God and Him only with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. With everything. Keep yourselves from idols.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.